

Malcolm Saville

**Strangers
at Witchend**



**A LONE PINE
ADVENTURE**

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Strangers at Witchend

Malcolm Saville

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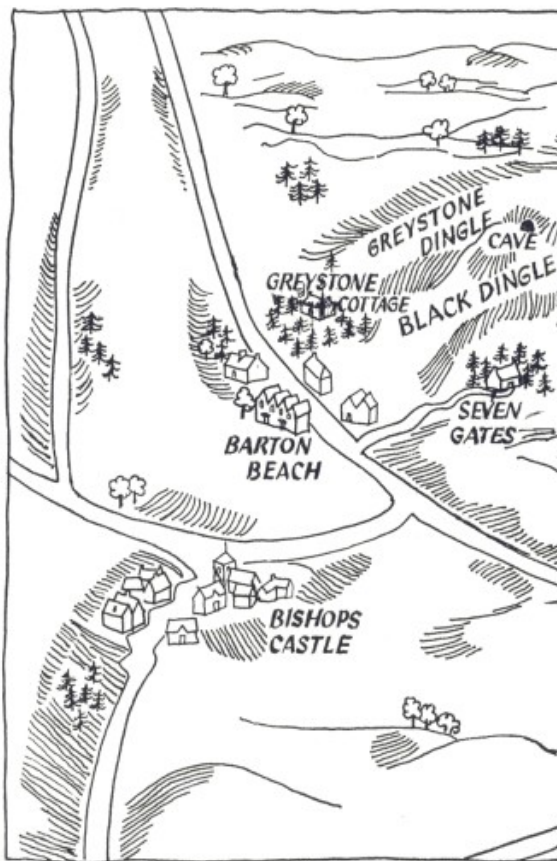
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For ALEX

My Favourite Fan



Foreword

This is the eighteenth story about the group of boys and girls who founded a secret club in the house called Witchend in a remote valley in the Shropshire hills. They called themselves the Lone Piners and, for over a quarter of a century now, these imaginary characters have come to stand for the qualities of courage, independence, tolerance and loyalty. Even if you meet them for the first time in this book, you will find that the story is complete in itself.

The background to this tale is the same as that of the first book, *Mystery at Witchend*, which was published in 1943 and has been in print ever since. The Lone Piners themselves have grown a little older in years and the elder ones have just left school. They have changed, naturally enough, in their attitude to the 1970s in which they are now living, and they are more aware of what they mean to each other. Many readers ask if these boys and girls ever existed or whether they are based on any I have known. They are not, and neither are the adults in any of my stories. They are all imaginary and have no reference to any living person.

But the countryside in which this tale is set is real enough and you can go yourself to the Long Mynd, which is a long plateau, 1,600 feet high, not very far from the Welsh border. It is a country of hills, and indeed the way of journeying through Shropshire to see it at its best is from one hill to another. Their names are as unforgettable as their outlines against a windy skyline - Caer Caradoc, The Lawley, Ragleth, Hope Bowdler and Stapeley. Then away to the west are the Stiperstones, and beyond the misty, dark mountains of Wales. Often rain comes over these hills, sweeping down the valleys like grey smoke, and all the valleys cut into the eastern escarpment of the Mynd become busy with running water - lovely streams born in the bogs half hidden in the heather and bilberries on the roof of the Mynd.

The best place from which to explore the latter is the little town of Church Stretton, which you can find on a map between Ludlow and Shrewsbury. There is no village called Onnybrook, nor will you find Barton Beach or Greystone Dingle. Neither are there farms called Seven Gates, or Ingles,

and I'm sorry to say there is not a house called Witchend. But if you are ever lucky enough to explore this fascinating borderland, you will probably find buildings very much like them.

The theme of the story is founded on fact, but all the "wrong doers", the police, and even Mr Robert Ruddy himself are imaginary.

Finally, I acknowledge with gratitude and thanks, personal advice and help given to me by Mr Hamil Westwood, the Assay Master of Birmingham. You will see why in the following pages.

M.S.

The Lone Pine Club

The first headquarters of the Club was a small clearing, marked by a solitary pine tree on the slope of the valley above the house called Witchend. The original rules of the Club, signed in blood by the members, are hidden in a tin beneath this tree and are set out in full in *Mystery at Witchend*. There are now nine fictional members of the Lone Pine Club, but it is not usual for them all to appear in one story. The following are featured in this one:

DAVID MORTON - Nearly 18. Just left school and lives and works in London. He is the Captain and Co-founder of the Club.

RICHARD (DICKIE) AND MARY MORTON - David's identical twin brother and sister. Nearly 11.

PETRONELLA (PETER) STERLING - A month or two younger than David, to whom she is devoted. Now works in a riding stable at Ludlow. Really the founder of the Club when she first met the Mortons when they bought Witchend, close to where she was then living. Has no mother but lives now with her retired father at Witchend.

TOM INGLES - The eldest Lone Piner, just senior to David. Born a Londoner but now lives with his uncle and aunt and helps to work the farm which bears their name about half a mile from Witchend.

JENNY HARMAN - Seventeen-year-old red-head. Lives with her father and step-mother who keep the village store and post office in the village of Barton Beach, near the Stiperstones where she was born. Nobody in her life like Tom Ingles.

HARRIET SPARROW - Is a twelve-year-old Londoner and the latest member of the Club. She is an only child and devoted to her grandfather who also appears in this story. Sensitive, imaginative, proud of her membership to the Club and devoted to the twins.

There are two other members who do not appear in the story - Jonathan (Jon) and Penelope (Penny) Warrender. These are two cousins and have also left school, but they live at Rye in Sussex. They cannot often meet all the others but they have shared some exciting adventures together.

1. Wednesday: The Man from the Past

At ten minutes to three, Harriet Sparrow and her grandfather were waiting at the main bookstall in London's Euston Station. They were waiting for David, Dickie and Mary Morton and they all were to catch the 15.15 to Shrewsbury. Harriet was so excited that she could not keep still. She had already decided that there was nothing on the bookstall that interested her and it was obvious that Mr Sparrow was tiring of her chatter. He did not like being kept waiting and was standing sentinel by their luggage.

He was a neat, dandified little man - rather like a perky sparrow as Dickie had once called him out of his hearing - and Harriet knew that people stared at him because the clothes he wore were old-fashioned. On this hot afternoon he was wearing a light grey coat over a suit of fine black and white checks and, of course, his usual starched white collar. Whenever he went out, whatever the weather, he wore a hat with a curly brim on top of his thinning white hair. Harriet knew that her grandfather now had a lot of money and was kind and generous to her parents and others, but he continued to wear his old steel-rimmed spectacles behind which his eyes shone brightly.

Harriet did hope the Mortons would come soon because she did not want her grandfather to be angry with them. She remembered that David was invariably punctual, and after another glance at the clock which showed the time in actual figures as 14.58, she began to worry. Suppose something awful had happened to them? Perhaps their taxi had broken down, or if they had come by Underground, Macbeth had fallen on the line and stopped about twenty trains?

She had just decided to ask her grandfather if they could go on to the platform and get seats for five when she saw the Mortons strolling out of the Booking Hall. David was in front wheeling their luggage on a push-it-yourself trolley and the twins were just behind him with a dejected-looking Macbeth dragging on his lead.

"There they are, Grandpa! I'll hurry them up and you try to get a porter," and she dashed across to her friends. David saw her first and waved and then the twins ran forward to meet her.

"Go and speak to my grandfather at once, twins," she gasped. "He's in a mood because you're over ten minutes late... Good afternoon, Mackie. You're looking rather ruffled. I'll speak to you properly later... Hello, David. You ought to know how fussed my grandfather gets if people are late. I thought there'd been a train accident with Mackie-----"

"My poor girl," David grinned. "How you must have suffered, and what's Mackie got to do with it? Sorry we're a bit late. Mother brought us down in the car and we got involved with traffic. I'll explain to your grandfather... And you're looking very smart, Harry, in that gay red dress. Did your grandad buy that for you?... Good afternoon, Mr Sparrow. I hope the twins have apologized. My mother sent her kindest regards to you and is looking forward to seeing you when we're all back in London again."

Mr Sparrow's mood passed like a cloud banished by sunshine. The twins had obviously done their stuff, Macbeth was wagging his tail although he hated railway stations, David had apologized with courtesy, and Harriet was looking radiant again.

The next few minutes were a hectic scramble, but at last they were all seated with their luggage in an empty compartment. Harriet took Macbeth on to her lap and said "Good afternoon" to him properly. David was on her right and her grandfather, after removing his coat but not his curly-brimmed hat, settled down in the corner beside her. The twins were opposite, and when Mary caught Harriet's eye she winked and passed her a bar of chocolate.

"I always feel ghastly empty when I'm excited, Harry. You look as if you're empty too so you'd better eat a little something. My greedy twin is never empty and we think, though we're not quite sure yet, that David is slimming. He wants to look his best now he's on his way to you know who... Isn't Mackie sweet, Harry? He's always liked you because you're kind and considerate. You don't think he's looking a bit *old*, do you? Not too many grey hairs? Good! Do you know that an absolutely foul, gross man

tripped over his lead when I was looking after him while big brother was buying his ticket just now-----"

"He didn't trip over his lead," Dickie interrupted. "You let him go when you were buying that chocolate and Mackie wandered off and was chewing a sandwich somebody had dropped and that man had a stupid little poodle that yapped at Mackie-----"

"It doesn't really matter, Dickie. Don't go on so in front of the Sparrows! They'll think we're quarrelsome... As I was saying, Harry, this fat, gross, bullying man acksherley *kicked* Mackie's sandwich away and when our darling barked at him in a gentlemanly sort of way and he saw me running to his rescue, he said, 'Take your bad-tempered *old* dog out of my way or I'll have him thrown out of the station.'... He's not looking old, is he?"

Harriet reassured her and then changed places with Dickie who wanted to be beside Mr Sparrow and talk about trains. Mr Sparrow was not only an expert on antiques but on trains as well. The Morton twins were the best friends she had ever made - she had met them first in an antique shop once owned by her grandfather near the Mortons' home in north London. They had told her often about the wonderful old house called Witchend where the Lone Pine Club was founded, and of which she was now a member, and now she was actually going there with them.

As the train started and quickly gathered speed, David looked across at her.

"Never mind the old dog, Harry. What about the old twins? Don't you think they're beginning to look elderly?"

Harriet wasn't sure whether he was serious. So she glanced at Mary beside her and then at Dickie who was excitedly writing in a notebook details of what she supposed was a grubby shunting locomotive. She knew the twins quite well now; realized how they understood each other, played up to each other and often plagued adults by acting and speaking as if they were much younger than eleven. They still enjoyed dressing alike and looking alike. Today they were both wearing blue jeans and dark blue shirts, and except that Mary's hair was curlier and longer than that of her twin, they were ridiculously alike. Truth was that Harriet liked them just as they were.

"To me they're still super!" she laughingly replied, and then said, "Have I ever thanked you properly for asking me to Witchend and do you know that my grandfather is going to stay in Ludlow and is thinking of buying another antique shop there called *The Golden Lion*? Ludlow isn't far from Witchend, is it?"

"About ten miles. Mr Sparrow! I've something to tell you if Dickie can spare you for a few moments."

The old gentleman beamed at him.

"Really, David, this boy has an astonishing knowledge of railways. I've been telling him what Euston Station looked like years ago. It's remarkable to think that he's never actually seen any of the big steam locos of the Midland Region which used to run on these tracks. They were a fine sight. Nothing like steam... What have you to tell me?"

"One of the reasons we were a bit pressed for time just now was that as we were leaving Brownlow Square that nice chap James Wilson rang up. You remember him? He's a reporter on the *Clarion* and helped us over that picture business when we first met you-----"

"Yes, David. I remember Mr Wilson. A credit to his profession. With what has he now become involved?"

"He wouldn't tell me over the phone and he was in a hurry as usual. Said he's going to Birmingham where he's got an important job-----"

"Assignment is the word," Dickie broke in. "You should know that, David. You are older and more experienced than I am - at the moment, that is."

Then he smiled brightly at the astonished Mr Sparrow and went on, "I have not yet had time to tell you, Mr Sparrow, because of the locomotives, but I have decided on my future career. I am going to be a journalist and have worked successfully with my friend James on more than one occasion. Now, David. Why was James telephoning you secretly and why haven't you told us about this?"

Harriet smiled as she saw David's face getting redder and redder, but then, with the greatest good humour, he laughed. "Nice speech, Richard. James knows about Witchend. He rang up to ask our telephone number, and when I told him we were going today he said he'd ring us and come over if he could. Sorry, Dickie, but he didn't mention the nature of his assignment. Where are we now?"

"A few miles north of Kings Langley," Dickie said. "We shall be stopping at Rugby, Coventry, Birmingham New Street and changing at Wolverhampton, and we are due at Shrewsbury at 18.01. I'm glad we shall see James. Wonder what he's up to? Must be important if they've sent him out of London."

"I told him you were coming with us and going to stay in Ludlow, Mr Sparrow," David said. "He seemed particularly interested."

After that Mr Sparrow dozed, and while Harriet looked after Mackie, the twins paid the first of several visits to the buffet car.

The time soon passed as the train hurried through the industrial midlands, stopping at Birmingham and, after they had changed at Wolverhampton, at Wellington. Here David showed Harriet the great hill called the Wrekin, and then they began to get their luggage together again. The train then crossed the Severn into Shrewsbury and gave them time to see its graceful spires against the summer skyline. Here they changed trains once more and there was time to take Macbeth for a walk in the station yard before the two-car diesel train started for Church Stretton, Craven Arms, Ludlow and Hereford.

When they were settled again Dickie sat with Harriet.

"It's absolutely fabulous you coming to Witchend with us, Harry. It's a sort of secret place with us. Seven Gates, where you came before, is super and we'll go over there of course, but Witchend is special. The Long Mynd isn't like the Stiperstones. It's green and purple with bracken and heather, but every valley has a stream and there are wild ponies and rare birds... And the Lone Pine camp where you'll sleep tonight round our campfire - you've

never seen a place like that, Harry. And it's ours. Secret and hidden, and now you belong to us it's yours too... Soon you'll see the Mynd."

Harriet sighed blissfully and clasped her hands in her lap. She closed her eyes and could almost see those green and purple valleys and hear the water singing. Suddenly London was a million miles away...

On the same beautiful August day when this story opened, Jasper Sterling was sitting in the sunshine in front of the old house called Witchend which he had known all his life and for which he now acted as caretaker for the Morton family.

He was a neat and tidy man with a figure and physique often envied by many of his younger friends. Unlike some of these he was content. He made no frantic attempts to keep up with the times and only rarely watched television. The hurried glimpses of the outside world which this machine brought into the privacy of his home only increased his appreciation of simple things. Such, for instance, as the peace of the hills, the friendship of ordinary people, the wonder and beauty of growing things, and more than anything else the love of his only daughter Petronella who, he realized, he was not going to have to himself for many years longer. And this was as it should be. David Morton was a good lad. Reasonably neat and tidy in his habits; sensible too and blessed with some good manners without being foolishly old-fashioned. And no doubt they'd often come back here because if he was spared he'd see his time out in the hills where he'd been born.

In the evening David and the rascally twins with their friend Harriet would arrive ten days before the Morton parents. This afternoon, Petronella, who was happily serving an apprenticeship in a riding stable at Ludlow, started her holiday. So for the next month Witchend would be a very different place.

Contentedly Mr Sterling rose from his seat, lit his pipe and walked to the gate. Beneath him the stream gurgled and sang in the culvert on its way to the sea. Many years ago he had shown Petronella the length of its journey on the map. More than once she had told him how she would like to follow it right down to where it was lost in the brown waters of the Severn, and only a few weeks ago they had looked it up again to see whether a pony

trek was possible, although Petronella's own Welsh pony Sally was now very elderly. Many times they had found the source of the brook at the head of the valley - a gently bubbling spring of clear water feeding a bog before trickling down between the bracken into the Witchend valley, along the side of the lane to Ingles, and down to the main road to join the Onny. This was one of the tributaries of the sparkling Teme which, wandering east, joined the Severn below Worcester.

Petronella - as her father preferred to call her, rather than her nickname Peter - would be in soon, and it might be a good idea to stroll up the lane to Ingles to meet her. Mr Sterling did this sometimes and his daughter was always pleased to see him and chat about what she had been doing since she left him after breakfast. She would be particularly excited this afternoon as David was coming.

He turned and looked at the old house, now just beginning to glow in the early afternoon sun. The thick walls were of stone and from under the roof jutted two gable windows. Behind it the hill came down so sharply that the house, in its snug position, seemed to be leaning against it. Part of the long barn, built at right angles to the house to form a capital "L", had been cleverly converted for himself and Petronella to make two bedrooms, a living-room, a tiny kitchen and bathroom. This, Mr Morton had told him when the arrangements were made, was his home for as long as he wanted it. The Mortons came as often as they could - either as a family or a few at a time, and occasionally Mr and Mrs Morton came by themselves for a long weekend.

Mr Sterling went into the house and made sure that everything was shipshape. Then he hung up his hat, put on his linen jacket and locked up carefully as he always did, unaware that by the time he opened up the house again something would have happened that in a few seconds would change his life temporarily and bring him much unhappiness.

The lane from Witchend was narrow and grass-grown and it led to Ingles Farm, situated not far from the top of the hill on the road from Onnybrook to Bishop's Castle. It was bigger than Witchend and very much a working farm, with corrugated iron-roofed barns and big cowsheds and outbuildings. As Mr Sterling opened the farmyard gate, carefully closed it behind him

and walked across the farmyard he could hear the hum of farm machinery. Young Tom Ingles came out into the sunshine, recognized him and waved a greeting.

"I'm a bit tied up at present, Mr Sterling," he called, "but Uncle's round the back somewhere."

Mr Sterling wandered round the side of the house and found his old friend sitting outside the kitchen door enjoying a mug of tea. Alf Ingles was a cheerful, ruddy-faced man with a powerful voice.

"Don't tell me, Alf," said Mr Sterling, "this is the very first time you've sat down today. So busy you had to eat standing up, didn't you? There's not a job on the farm that anybody can do as well as you can, and young Tom is a good lad but he wants watching all the time and what with one thing and another farming isn't what it was."

Alf Ingles roared with laughter.

"You're right, Jasper. You're right. You don't do any work yourself now but you reckon you know everything that everybody else be doing... Go in the kitchen and ask Betty for a mug of tea and then come out here and interrupt my work, as usual."

Mr Sterling nodded and within a few minutes he rejoined his friend.

"So the first lot arrive this evening?" the farmer said. "Your holiday's over then, Jasper. You'll have no time for gossiping here. It'll be good to see David and those twins again... Nice for your Peter too. That David is a good lad. Reckon we're lucky, Jasper. Tom's Jenny is a nice girl too... What's this we hear about the twins bringing that Sparrow girl? Nice old-fashioned-looking little thing, wasn't she?"

Jasper Sterling nodded and lit his pipe.

"That's so, Alf. Nice girl, Harriet. Did I tell you that her grandfather came into a tidy bit o' cash? The Mortons knew him well when he had an antique shop near them in London. Then he bought one up in Yorkshire and had a

stroke o' luck if anyone ever did. On the land behind the shop was a shaft to an old lead mine and they found uranium or something like that in it."

"What about us searching for a bit of uranium on Ingles, eh, Jasper? Don't they say the Romans mined for lead once round the Stiperstones?"

"You'd better ask Mr Sparrow, Alf. He's coming up with the youngsters to spend a week in Ludlow looking out for more antique shops, so David tells Petronella... quite a character is Mr Sparrow, and very fond of his granddaughter. Don't know much about her parents but she seemed a lonely little thing. Maybe Mr Sparrow wants to settle up in these parts... Now here's Betty come to join us... Sit down here, my dear."

Mrs Ingles smiled at them both affectionately. "No sitting down time for me, Jasper. It's Peter on the telephone for you. Says she couldn't get an answer from Witchend... No, no, Jasper. Nothing to worry about. She just wants to speak to you. Got a surprise, she says, and sounds excited."

Mr Sterling loathed using the telephone and had once confessed to Peter that, like the telegram, he always feared that he was going to hear bad news. And now, whyever should his daughter want to telephone him if something grievous had not happened?

As he walked reluctantly through Mrs Ingles' kitchen into the dark hall, a motor bicycle roared up the hill, paused outside the farmyard gate, and then turned into the Witchend lane. Mr Sterling neither saw nor heard it because he was indoors and picking up the telephone.

"Yes, Petronella," he announced with gloomy foreboding. "This is your father. What has happened?"

"Everything is all right," Petronella quickly assured him. "I'm speaking from a call-box in Ludlow as I've just missed a bus. I've got a surprise present for you, Dad, which I can't bring on my bike... It's not suitable, that's why. And not the right shape. Yes, I can bring it on the next bus in about five minutes, but will you please ask Tom or Uncle Alf to meet me in the Land-Rover at the Onnybrook bus stop. I'll walk down the lane from Ingles so in about half an hour you could stroll along to meet me. Don't wait

at Ingles because I want to give you your present when we're alone... 'Bye, Dad."

Mr Sterling replaced the receiver wondering what the girl would do next. Could not be brought on her bike because it was the wrong shape!

Mr and Mrs Ingles laughed when they were told about the mysterious parcel, but the farmer promised that Tom would be at Onnybrook to meet the bus.

When the friends parted, Mr Sterling strolled back down the lane and his thoughts were agreeably of his daughter. He was smiling to himself as he turned the last corner of the lane and saw, to his surprise, a motor cycle on the grassy patch outside the open gate of Witchend. There was no sign of its rider but a crash helmet was propped on the handle-bars.

Mr Sterling was annoyed and determined to move the machine if he could, and then close the gate. He quickened his pace, and as the house came into sight a man walked round the corner of the big barn and stopped and stared at him. He was too far away for Mr Sterling to see him clearly, but he was sure he was not a local. He was slight and of middle height with a high forehead and long, untidy black hair, and wearing an open-necked shirt and black leather jacket. From the fingers of his right hand dangled a pair of dark goggles.

Mr Sterling, in a voice trembling with anger, spoke first.

"You are trespassing, sir. This is private property and I must ask you to leave at once. And be so good as to move your machine from this gateway."

From a distance of about twenty yards the two men stared at each other. The stranger saw a spare, elderly man with white hair and clean-shaven, tanned face, and there was something about the way he was standing - not at attention but in an uncompromising way - and something in the tone of his voice which stirred his memory.

And when he replied, Mr Sterling was also reminded of something he hoped he had put out of his mind for ever.

"Sorry if I'm trespassing," the man said. "Not doing any harm but I couldn't get an answer when I knocked so I was having a look round. No offence, but I'm interested in old houses in this district - hoping to rent, or buy, you see - and I'm very taken by this. Very, very attractive little place. Would you be interested-----?"

"I would *not* be interested in any offer," Mr Sterling said as he stepped forward. "I am not the owner of this property although I live here and am responsible for it. It is not for sale."

The stranger stepped forward at the same time, and his expression changed as the old man ordered him off the premises. Suddenly he remembered the determined stance, the clipped speech and those clear blue eyes in which he now saw recognition. Too late he raised his hand to slip the goggles over his eyes. Too late, because Mr Sterling, now that he was close enough, had seen the triangular white scar above the other's right eye and had remembered where he had seen it before. So shocked was he by this encounter that for a moment or two he felt faint and closed his eyes. When he opened them again the man was fitting on his crash helmet and was already astride his machine. With a kick the engine started, and without a backward look he rode out of sight down the lane.

Mr Sterling walked slowly over to close the gate and then heard the shrill warning of the motor cyclist's horn and what sounded like a shout of warning. Petronella! Of course, she was due now and he had forgotten her. Leaving the gate open he began running down the lane, and his heart was thumping uncomfortably when he saw her running towards him - and, although he could hardly believe his eyes, prancing and barking excitedly by her side was a lively black dachshund. He stopped thankfully and waited for her.

"Daddy! Are you all right? Why were you running like that? What's wrong? Was it that fool of a man on the motor bike? He was coming too fast and nearly ran us down and killed Brock... Look at Brock, Dad. He likes you already. He's my surprise present."

The little dog was jumping up at him and pawing his leg and suddenly, what with the events of the last ten minutes and with the example of his

daughter's love for him, he found it impossible to find any words. He stooped and patted the dog, who licked his fingers affectionately and then slowly wagged his tail and looked up at his new master with his head on one side.

"He likes you, Dad. I know he does, and I must tell you at once that he is just two years old, fully grown and house-trained. He's to keep you company when I'm not here... How did I get him and wasn't he expensive?... I heard at the stables that his owners were going abroad and what they wanted most for him was a good home. And this *is* a good home, isn't it? Best I ever had anyway... You do like him, don't you?... Good. Put him on the lead and take him home yourself. He must learn to obey you."

The dog stood obediently while Mr Sterling clipped on the leash. He was certainly very handsome with a fine head, brown eyes and the sturdy, short front bow legs of the well-built dachs. His back was straight, his smooth, velvety coat was jet-black save for brown paws and a ridiculous little brown patch under his long tail.

"He's a fine dog, Petronella. Thank you, my dear. I'm sure he'll be a credit to you. But have you thought what the twins' Macbeth will think of him? Scottish terriers are fighters and he may be jealous."

"I thought of that, Dad. I don't believe they'll fight because Brock is so gentle. I guess Mackie will look after him as if he was a young brother. Now I want to know about that man on the motor bike. Had he been to the house and what did he want?"

Mr Sterling stood up and Brock, still sitting at his feet, looked up at him waiting for the order to move. He felt steadier now, but the one thing he did not want to do was to tell his daughter about the man with the scar. And he knew this was going to be difficult.

"He annoyed me, my dear. When I came back from Ingles he was poking about round the house. Said it was a nice little place and he'd like to buy it. I told him it wasn't for sale... Now tell me what you've been doing this morning." And so he changed the subject.

Peter looked up at him shrewdly and then seemed to decide not to say what was on the tip of her tongue. Instead she slipped her hand in his arm and they walked in silence back to Witchend.

Inside the house Brock sniffed round and then, while Mr Sterling was making tea and sandwiches, he sat under the kitchen table and watched his master.

Mr Sterling never talked just for the sake of making conversation, but he was more silent than usual while they were eating. He knew that Peter was watching him carefully, and to his surprise and annoyance he was still feeling shaken by his encounter with the man who had come back so unexpectedly into his life.

When they had cleared away the dishes, Peter tried again to win her father's confidence.

"What really upset you about that man this afternoon?" she questioned gently. "I've never seen you so upset *inside*, if you know what I mean, and it isn't any use denying it. Nobody knows you better than I do and I believe you're afraid of something that you're trying to keep from me. You can't fool me. I'm not a schoolgirl any longer."

It was just the question Mr Sterling had feared.

"It is the truth that he was interested in Witchend," he answered. "He's looking for a house like ours in the country. He wasn't exactly aggressive, but I didn't like him. Not the sort of man I care for... Now that's enough, my dear. I'd like a rest."

Peter took her father's arm.

"You're trying to change the subject again, Dad. You wouldn't be as upset as this just because an unpleasant man was looking at the house. Did he try to bully you? I want to know. Have you ever seen him before?"

"Yes, Petronella. I have seen him before, and I must ask you not to question me further about this. This unpleasant encounter has reminded me of

something I want to forget... Something I *must* forget. All you have to do is to look forward to this evening, which is what I am doing. It will be good to have the others here. It will cheer us up."

Peter did not say that, until she had met him in the lane, she had not felt the need of being cheered up. She had been happily excited until she had sensed this dramatic change in her father. She knew him to be a kind and gentle man and until now had never doubted that he had any secrets from her.

"Very well, Dad. I'll try not to ask any more questions except this one... Did the man you want to forget recognize you?"

"Oh yes, my dear. I'm sure he did. Let us not speak of this again."

But Peter could not forget the expression on his face when he had staggered up the lane to her, nor the misery in his voice when he had given her only half his confidence. David would be here soon. She must tell him about this unhappy and mysterious encounter.

2. Wednesday: Bombast

Harriet stirred and for a second wondered where she was. She looked up and saw David smiling at her and remembered.

"Hello, sleepyhead! We get out soon at a station called Craven Arms. Tom Ingles, or maybe his uncle, will meet us. Your grandfather will stay on to Ludlow... Sure you want to bring your sleeping-bag with you?"

She flashed him a smile and turned to Dickie. "Show me those old hills of yours."

He pointed to the left where a long hill like a whale's back stretched for a mile or more. The sides were smooth and treeless and it looked as if there could only just be room to walk along the knife edge to the summit.

"It's called the Lawley," Dickie said. "We've done it once. Next is Caradoc, and there's a cave in the side below the cairn on the top where a famous British chief called Caractacus made his last stand against somebody or other. I've forgotten who, but don't ask David else he gives us a history lesson. It was a smelly old cave when we found it. Somebody had left old tins and rubbish there. The next two hills are called Helmeth and Hazier, and the super round one which you'll see better in a minute is Ragleth. Now look this side, Harry. There's the Mynd. It's ten miles long, and if you are on top you'd see the Stiperstones and lots of Welsh mountains far away on the other side..."

Mary put Macbeth on the floor and came over to the window.

"You can't see the Witchend valley, Harry. It's too small and hidden under a wood. But the valleys you can see are like it only much, much bigger. The trees are a new state forest. Peter's father remembers when there weren't any trees on the Mynd except a few hawthorns. We'll explore it together. We can dam one of the streams and make a pool big enough to bathe in. The town underneath it is Church Stretton."

Ten minutes later they were on the platform of Craven Arms, and Harriet was still waving to Mr Sparrow when the train moved out on its way to Ludlow and the south. When she turned, Macbeth was barking excitedly and jumping up at a brown-faced young man in a check shirt and blue jeans who was laughing at them all and helping David with the luggage. Tom Ingles! And looking more grown up and handsome than ever. Harriet was suddenly shy of him and blushed when he gently restrained Mackie and came over to her.

"Well, well! It's Harry, growing up nicely and looking very pretty. How are you, love?"

He put his arm round her shoulders and gave her a hug, and when they all trooped after him into the station yard she was still blushing.

She sat between Tom and David on the front seat of the Land-Rover while the twins bounced about in the back. Soon they turned left off the main road where a signpost pointed to Bishop's Castle and suddenly she saw the great bulk of the Mynd against the skyline.

"If we kept on along this road you'd see where the Mynd runs down to the valley at a place called Plowden," David said. "We don't go as far as that but turn to the right soon. Ingles and Witchend are almost under the hill. Do you like it, Harry? Nothing like this round London, is there?"

She nodded and found herself leaning hard against Tom as he swung the Land-Rover round into a lane where the woods were thick on the right and a few rolling pastures on the left ran up to the flanks of the great hill itself. Left again, soon after, into a still narrower lane.

"Nearly there, Harry," Tom said. "You've met my Uncle Alf, haven't you? He's up in the harvest fields, but you must come round and see him soon. He likes pretty girls."

"Tom!" she gasped. "How awful of me. I haven't asked you about Jenny. I'm so sorry. Is she here? I bet she's a great favourite with your Uncle Alf."

"Yes, she is, Harry, and with me. She's not here today but she'll be over soon. Helping her dad in the shop or something. Sent her love and longing to see you... Here we are, and look who's sitting on the gate."

It was Peter, and before Tom had turned in off the road, David had opened the door on his side, jumped out and run over to her. Harriet saw Peter lean forward and David swing her off the top rung of the gate into his arms. For a second or two she held him, then laughed and ran over to the others.

Tom stayed in the driving seat amidst all the commotion, and when he could make himself heard he said that he would take their luggage along to Witchend and be back in five minutes.

"You'll find Aunt Betty in the kitchen," he shouted. "She's probably baking as usual but she wants to see you. Don't go before I come back, twins. Got something special to tell you. Bit of a warning, really."

When he came back the twins had opened the farmyard gate and were waiting for him. Macbeth, sitting between them, was looking content. Mrs Ingles liked him!

Tom drove the Rover into the shed and then walked back to them. He was looking serious and the twins were unusually subdued by his attitude.

"Couldn't tell you before, but I reckon you two and Mackie here have got a big surprise coming to you. Thought I ought to warn you first, although David and Harriet will know soon enough."

"What is it, Tom? What d'you mean? What's it to do with Mackie?" Mary pleaded.

"Peter didn't tell you anything about the dog, did she? The new dog she's bought for her father?"

"Peter's bought a dog for Mr Sterling? You're joking, Tom. She knows we've got Mackie. We don't want any more dogs at Witchend," Dickie protested.

"What sort of a dog and why has she bought it?" Mary said ominously.

Tom shrugged and turned away so that they should not see his lips twitching. It was a very long time since he had got his own back on the twins.

"You'll have to ask her yourselves, but she told me that now Mr Sterling is so much alone - and some days if she's very busy at the stables Peter stays in Ludlow overnight - she wanted him to have a dog of his own. She's bought him a very fierce bloodhound. He's a big dog, Mary... Now, don't make a fuss, but I'll send Harriet to you now and you three get back to Witchend with Mackie and see for yourselves before Peter and David get there. Maybe you could ask Mr Sterling to let you see the dog? I believe he's chained up most of the time but I thought you ought to know. They call him Bombast... Keep Mackie on his lead at Witchend. Just as well and fairer to him too."

"Do you believe him, twin?" Mary whispered. "A great big bloodhound called Bombast in Witchend when it belongs to Mackie... And Peter bought him!"

Dickie was obviously as shocked as his sister, but before he could answer, Harriet came running round the side of the house, and when they had told her the dreadful news she said, "I always thought Mackie could beat any dog and p'raps this silly old Bombast is a soppy old bloodhound. I shouldn't worry. Let's go and see."

All the same, as they hurried down the Witchend lane, Harriet did wonder why Peter had not told them when they were in Mrs Ingles' kitchen, but of course she had been rather taken up with David. Meanwhile Macbeth pranced along the lane, snapping playfully now and then at a butterfly without a thought of a Bombast lurking for him in his own happy hunting ground.

At the last turn in the lane Mary clipped on his lead. Then Harriet saw Witchend for the first time, heard the stream singing in a culvert and the wind sighing in the larch trees of the wood. She saw the purple clematis rioting up over the porch, and as Dickie opened the gate Peter's father came

round the side of the house wearing his old panama hat on the back of his head. He gave a smile of welcome as he recognized the twins.

Still with his hand on the latch of the gate, Dickie said quietly, "Do you see what I see, twin?" and as he spoke Brock the dachshund ran forward a few yards with flopping ears, stood still and then barked a gruff, warning bark. Macbeth growled and tugged at his lead, but his tail was wagging and he did not seem to be particularly annoyed. The twins looked at each other and Harriet laughed.

"Tom was pulling your legs. That's not a Bombast bloodhound. He's a lovely little dog."

Mr Sterling said, without effect, "Come here, Brock. Come here. These are friends," but then the twins ran to him and Harriet forgot her shyness as Mr Sterling shook hands with her.

"You are very, very welcome to Witchend, Harriet. I have heard a lot about you from Petronella - and these two, of course. Go anywhere you like, and if you would rather sleep in the house than in the camp you have only to say so... Now, Richard and Mary, did Petronella tell you about Brock? This is Brock, and he has just been given to me to keep me company. I see that Macbeth is eyeing him warily, but Brock must understand that your brave dog is his senior."

Mary unclipped the tartan lead but kept her hand on Mackie's collar.

"Peter didn't mention him, Mr Sterling. You are quite sure that his name isn't Bombast and that you haven't got a bloodhound hidden away somewhere?"

The old man looked astonished, as well he might, and then instead of smiling, as he would normally have done, he passed his hand across his eyes and forehead as if he had a bad headache and then turned away.

"Brock is wagging his tail," Harriet said. "He wants to be friends. Let Mackie go."

Now that Mary no longer worried about Bombast, she was anxious that Macbeth should behave well. And he did - rather like a gentlemanly elder brother. As soon as he was free, the two dogs stood and watched each other cautiously. Then Brock advanced a few steps and Macbeth circled round him. Then they sniffed each other and suddenly Brock barked and sprang at his senior, and in a moment the two dogs were rolling on the grass and snapping at each other in a mock fight. They were still playing when Peter and David arrived.

"I've never seen Mackie do that before," Mary admitted. "He likes Brock and so do we, Peter. It was a lovely idea to buy him for your father when Mackie isn't here to guard the house. You like him, don't you, David?"

"Yes, I do. They'll be friends now. Where's your father, Peter?"

"He's tired and a bit worried. I'll tell you all about it presently, David. I'll go to him now but will you help the others to settle in. We've put up a camp-bed in Mary's room for Harriet if she doesn't want to sleep out. I've tidied the camp but you might help the twins up with the tents, and I've cut some fuel for the fire. I thought we could all go up there shortly and cook some bangers. Would you like that, Harry? We've got a double tent and you could squeeze in with Mary. You don't mind sleeping out, do you?"

Harriet did not want to admit that she would not be very distressed if it poured with rain so hard that even the twins would prefer their own beds under a proper roof. She knew she had to go through with this and perhaps it would not be so bad after the first night. It had been fun sleeping in the barn at Seven Gates, but out of doors where there might be all sorts of nocturnal animals and birds and insects was a different matter. And somehow she did not feel that the twins would be very sympathetic if she confessed to such childish doubts and fears. So cheerfully she agreed that she had been looking forward to sleeping out more than anything else and they all went indoors to unpack.

Half an hour later, the twins took Harriet up to the Lone Pine camp for the first time, and Mary told her how she had first noticed the tall pine tree standing by itself on the other side of the stream.

"Peter and I found it together, Harry. It's difficult to get into from below so we still get down to it from above where there's a sort of passage through the gorse. And we can still climb into the tree and look right down at Witchend... Off you go, Mackie. Show us the way. Peter and David will bring Brock presently."

So Harriet came at last to the perfect, secret meeting place of the Lone Piners, and it was more wonderful and exciting than she had believed possible. The grassy clearing under the great tree was big enough for four single sleeping tents. First Dickie showed her how to put up the double one for herself and Mary, and then she helped him with his. Then they lifted her up into the tree so that she seemed high above the world and could see as far as Ingles and down into the valley where road and railway ran south to Ludlow. Beyond that town she could see more hills which, they told her, were Wenlock Edge and Brown Clee and Titterstone Clee. Although she could not see the summit of the Mynd, the western horizon was dominated by the green and purple flanks of the mountain and the dark ranks of the new state forest marching up them.

Dickie showed her the store of dry fuel in a small pit covered with a rubber groundsheet and the matches kept dry in an old sweet tin. Peter had left them the frying pan, a kettle of water from the stream and a large container of bread, butter, cheese, lard and sausages, and David had promised to bring up the old suitcase with picnic plates and mugs.

While they worked happily and Macbeth snuffled round in the undergrowth, Mary told Harriet again about the many adventures the Lone Piners had shared. As dusk fell, and the first bats fluttered above the roof of the old house below, Dickie showed her how to build and light a camp-fire within four bricks spaced out in a square so that the frying pan could rest on the corners of two of them. Mary pricked the sausages and as they began to sizzle, Harriet heard the peewit's whistle, and David, Peter and Brock joined them.

It was nearly dark by the time they had finished the meal. Leaning back on the grass they looked up at the stars through the branches of the old pine. The wood smoke smelled sweet and every now and then, as Peter told Harriet some of the stories and legends of the Shropshire Hills, Dickie

threw dry pine cones on the embers of the fire. Then it was that bright little flames lit up Peter's blonde head resting on David's shoulder.

"And hauntings?" Harriet whispered. "It's all so lonely round here. There isn't a sound. Are there any ghosts in haunted houses? What about Witchend? Is that haunted?"

"Only by lovely things - and thoughts, and super people," Peter said thoughtfully. "I suppose there are one or two horrid places round here - and specially round the Stiperstones as Jenny will tell you - that some people say are haunted... Right on the top of the Mynd, Harry, by the ancient track called the Port Way is a place called Beacon Cottage. It's empty now, but my father says that in the last war it was used by the Air Force for training falcons. You'll see lots of them over the Mynd. It sounds most peculiar now, but the fighter planes which saved England from German invasion had propellers and not jets... You tell Harry, David. I s'pose you know more about it than I do."

"I've read about it and seen *The Battle of Britain* film, Harry, but the point was that these fighters were small and flown by one man. The airfields were small too and often in country places. On taking off and landing many wild birds used to be sucked into the propellers and into the engines, I suppose, and sometimes the plane would crash. So the R.A.F. trained falcons to keep the airfields clear of wild birds, and our father, who was in the R.A.F., told me it worked... Go on, Peter. You told me once that you hate Beacon Cottage and that your pony Sally doesn't like it either."

"That's true, and I don't blame her. The windows are shuttered and seem to stare at you like blind eyes. In the front are thick grass and weeds, and beech trees are planted all round the place. As a wind-break, I s'pose, but the wind has won, because the trees are all stunted and bent into beastly shapes. Behind the house and the outbuildings there's a peaty bog and one or two deep pools of black water."

"Can you see it from the lookout in the tree?" Harriet whispered.

"No, but there's a big flat rock about a mile from here up the hill which is as high as Beacon Cottage. The twins have often been up there with me and

we call it Peter's Rock. If you climb on to the top of it you can see over the state forest as far as the cottage. In daytime you can see it clearly without glasses because the walls are white. In about an hour the moon will be high enough and you'll probably see it from the rock. The track goes up the side of the wood here, but I shouldn't go tonight if I were you... Come on, David. Brock must come with us, and we'll leave the front door on the latch so that if any of these little ones wake up or can't sleep they can creep into their own beds in the house... Goodnight, all."

When they had gone, Dickie got up.

"Hope you're not feeling sleepy yet, Harry. We have matters to discuss, haven't we, Mary?"

"Yes, and I know what you're thinking and I hope Harry is on our side in these matters. We have suffered insults, Harry. First from Tom over that ridiculous Bombast business. Fancy thinking that we should be fooled by such nonsense! But we don't allow Tom to try and make us look silly, Harry. And we don't allow those two who have just gone, very pleased and soppy with themselves, to refer to us as the 'little ones'. We don't, do we, twin? And you don't put up with it either, Harry. We would have you know that we do not forget that you are our guest and guests must not be insulted. You agree, Harry?"

Poor Harriet, who had yawned several times during this duologue, agreed instantly. She was longing for her bed - preferably under the roof of Witchend - and feared that she knew what Dickie was going to suggest. She was right.

"Peter said it would be better if we didn't go up to the rock tonight. She has no right to suggest that to us as her opinion was not asked. We'll start now with Mackie and be there when the moon is high. If those two think we're scared because she says Beacon Cottage is haunted, she's wrong. This is a good adventure for you to start with, Harry... Put Mackie on his lead, Mary. It's too dark for him to wander and we don't want to make a row whistling for him."

As soon as they were clear of the wood Harriet felt better. It was a beautiful night with a glorious star-studded sky. Once they heard an owl call and Mary said it belonged to Witchend, but apart from that there was no sound but that of the heather brushing against their legs and the clink of a loose stone under their shoes. The air was clean and cool and there was a faint smell of bracken and heather. Once or twice Dickie, who was leading, stopped, and they looked behind them, but there was nothing to see but the rolling moorland and their little track looking like a ribbon on a dark carpet. After about twenty minutes Mary, who was behind Harriet with Macbeth, pointed out Peter's Rock ahead of them. Then the path became steeper and Harriet was soon out of breath. Dickie put out a hand and helped her over some loose stones and pulled her up until they were all three leaning against the rock which was in deep shadow.

"Let's just climb up, show Harry the cottage, and then go back," Mary said. "Coming was a good idea, twin, but I'm tired now. We'll have to haul Mackie up too."

"Quiet a sec," Dickie whispered. "I can hear something. It's a plane with a different sort of engine... I'll nip up first and then help you two. Come round the side where it's easier."

He stepped out of the shadows, and as the girls followed they both heard the throb of an engine from the sky. Dickie clambered up, Mary passed him the struggling Macbeth and then pushed Harriet from behind while Dickie helped her from above. Then, as the two of them helped Mary, Dickie said excitedly,

"The cottage! You can see it now, Harry. There. Right ahead... Mary, look! There's a light. A yellow light, like a lantern on the roof..."

Harriet and Mary could both see it now and, as they watched, the yellow light changed to a pinpoint of green. The noise of the aircraft increased, and as Dickie yelled and pointed to the sky a helicopter, flying low, came into sight above the cottage. Then the green light went out.

3. Thursday: Ludlow Town

Primrose lane in Ludlow is an insignificant back street on the outskirts of the town. Nobody knows how or why it got its name and there is nothing about it today which suggests the promise of spring. It is narrow, and on each side are small terraced houses, three of which have been made into small shops - a grocer, a newsagent and a radio and television shop. The latter, and the rooms above it, have been empty for several months, but a week before the events described in this chapter it was re-opened by a new tenant. Within a few days a signwriter arrived and above the shop window painted the words:

SID EDWARDS TV AND RADIO

Most of the inhabitants of Primrose Lane remained uninterested in the arrival amongst them of Mr Edwards. The exceptions were some small boys who were fascinated by the interiors of television receivers and the widow, Edith Collins, who lived opposite the shop. Mrs Collins often found it difficult to fill the time at her disposal, and her hobby was a never-failing interest in other people's business and an inability to mind her own. From her comfortable chair behind the draped nylon curtains of her front room she had watched the unpacking of a removal van without a name on it. To her regret she had missed the actual arrival of her new neighbour, who must have slipped into the house much earlier in the day. Later, however, he came out on to the pavement to help the two removal men with some machinery and, surprisingly, a large safe. When the van had gone, Mr Edwards locked the shop door and, to her dismay, pulled down the blinds of the front windows. It was soon obvious that he was living there alone.

Without meeting him face to face, Mrs Collins observed that he was about forty, slight, with long, rather unkempt black hair, and although she did not know anything about radio, she did wonder why a man should want to try to revive a business which had already failed in a back street.

But she bided her time and watched and listened to what some of her other neighbours had to say when she met them in the grocer's which was also the

gossip shop lower down Primrose Lane. She learned that Mr Edwards had bought some groceries and had not encouraged light conversation. She also heard that he had hired an empty shed at the bottom of the street in which he kept a small van without a name on it and a motor cycle. The former had been used several times to bring stock into the shop, but unfortunately Mrs Collins could not see the bottom of the street from her window and so, as soon as Mr Edwards left his premises, she was ignorant of his movements. This distressed her.

She had, however, been impressed by the arrival of telephone engineers the day after he moved in. There were few telephones in Primrose Lane, so Mr Edwards obviously meant business.

At half-past eight on the morning after the arrival of the Mortons and Harriet at Witchend, Mr Edwards, clad now in blue overalls, came out on to the pavement of Primrose Lane with a bucket of water and proceeded to clean the paintwork and glass of his shop window. He was a few minutes too early for Mrs Collins who only realized what he was doing when she opened her door to collect her milk. Hurriedly she brought her tea and simple breakfast into the front room on a tray. She watched Edwards pull up the shop blind and disclose a modest display of TV and radio receivers and then fix, on the inside of the window, a notice which read:

CUT-PRICE COLOUR TV. BARGAINS FOR ALL. EASY TERMS.
INSPECTION INVITED

Mrs Collins decided to accept this invitation. One of her little radio sets had been out of order for months, but she was really more interested to know if Mr Edwards was going to settle down here without a Mrs Edwards. So, when she had washed up her breakfast things, she took her transistor across the street. As she opened the shop door she heard the whirr of a buzzer and Mr Edwards came into the shop from a back room. He left the door open and Mrs Collins was able to see quite a large and well-equipped workshop.

"Good morning," he said briskly. "You're my first customer. What can I do for you? Won't the set work?"

She put the receiver on the counter and as he bent his head to open the back she noticed a large white triangular scar above his right eye.

"No, it won't, not a squeak," she said. "You are the Mr Edwards who moved in here the other day? Mr Edwards himself, I mean? I'm your neighbour from over the way. Right opposite. Name of Collins, and I wanted to wish you luck, Mr Edwards, if you see what I mean. I reckoned I might have come over before to see if I could give a hand but I haven't happened to notice Mrs Edwards about and I'm not one to interfere or push in where I'm not wanted..."

When he looked up at her she noticed that his eyes were dark and bright - and hard. For a moment or two he stared at her and she suddenly felt uncomfortable.

"I'm sure you wouldn't, Mrs Collins. Very neighbourly of you to look in. I've been too busy setting up my workshop to pass the time o' day with anybody. Mrs Edwards and the boy are still in Birmingham waiting until I've settled in a bit and sold our house there. You have to do a lot of moving about in the job I'm going to establish from this shop. Service and maintenance is what I'm offering and until I can afford an assistant to look after the shop, I shall often have to close it for an hour or so. But we'll soon settle down, Mrs Collins... There's not much wrong with your set. Just sit down and I'll get it working in a few minutes."

Mrs Collins did as she was told. She had certainly got more information from Mr Edwards in a few minutes than she had thought possible. He seemed a nice, well-mannered man, and when he brought back her radio in working order and refused to make a charge she was so surprised that she did not insist.

"Certainly not, Mrs Collins. You're my first customer and let's hope you bring me luck. Just tell your friends to bring their radio repairs here, and if they're after a new set I can get anything they like at a discount and I also provide an after-sales service. Cheerio, Mrs Collins, and thanks for calling."

He did not open the door for her, but when she had gone he watched her through the window cross the street and go into her house.

"Nosey old trout," he muttered as he went into his workshop behind the shop.

The man with the scar who now called himself Sid Edwards was a good radio engineer and also had other skills. At least ten years ago he had decided that easier money and much more of it could be made by dishonest means and, up to a point, he had succeeded. There had been a few setbacks and one interruption to his new career, but this experimental move to Ludlow had great possibilities - if he was careful. He closed the door of the workshop behind him - the buzzer would warn him when anybody came into the shop. There were two telephones - one on a workbench and the other on a modern steel desk. He sat down at the latter, glanced at his watch and then dialled a local number and asked for Major Graham.

"Listen, Fred," he said. "Shop's open now but it's early closing day and I shut at one. Come soon after - both of you. Sorry, Fred. Can't change plans," and rang off.

Then, from a drawer in the desk, he produced several sheets of large-scale maps of the district, studied them carefully and made some notes. Later he opened the safe which contained several steel cash boxes, the contents of which he examined minutely with a jeweller's magnifying glass in his eye, and then made some further notes and calculations. Only three times during the morning did the buzzer announce a customer. He was patient and courteous with them all - even to a lad who wanted to sell him a useless third-hand radio.

At one o'clock he locked the shop door and reversed the cardboard notice from OPEN to CLOSED and returned to the back room. Five minutes later the shop door-bell rang three times and he admitted Major and Mrs Graham and bolted the door after them.

"Back room," Edwards said tersely. "Haven't got long but I want a report."

He sat down in his desk chair and swivelled it round to face them. He did not offer a chair to the tweedy, smartly-dressed woman who looked round the workshop with distaste and leaned elegantly against one of the workbenches. The Major, a short, ruddy-faced man with a clipped, greying

moustache was well-dressed like his wife, and they both looked out of place in these surroundings - and indeed in the company of the man with the scar.

"Stop fidgeting," the latter said. "What news? You've both been in this dump for four days. What's doing?... *Keep still, can't you?*... You get on my nerves."

"I've got two things to say first, Henry-----"

"Now, now, Fred: that's not my name. I'm Sid Edwards and that's Mister Edwards to you... And you're just going to say that you don't like me calling you Fred but that's something you may have to suffer. I'll call you what I like when I like and you're not in a position to argue... Now then, report."

The woman, who had been examining her manicured fingernails, looked up and said coolly,

"If you two men would stop behaving like children we might get somewhere. What Fred wanted to say, *Mister* Edwards, is that we don't like coming to places like this - particularly when the shop is closed. I agree with him for once. Primrose, or Pansy Lane, or whatever it's called, is not the sort of place Major Graham and his wife would visit at any time. You're too close to your neighbours. A woman from the house opposite was watching us from behind her curtains while we were waiting on your step. We're in business together, Sid, and although we know you're in control there's no law against us saying what we think. The area may be all right for us to work and there's no reason why we can't use the telephone, but this is a bad and dangerous place for us to meet and please don't suggest it again. I thought this idea of scuttling out of Birmingham was because out in the country we should be safer from inquisitive people. I know we have to meet sometimes, but I hope you'll agree it's the first and last time in this dump."

Edwards nodded.

"Something in what you say, Molly, and we won't waste time. So long as you remember what I know about you both, and that what I know is what the police would like to know, we'll get along. May as well tell you that I'm looking for places round here which would suit you - and some other

colleagues. I agree that in your sort of job a decent house looks more convincing than a hotel. I've been looking at maps and there are plenty of likely-looking properties within twenty or thirty miles of what you call this dump, Molly. You'd be surprised to know that many of the big farmhouses round here have been owned by the same family for years and these people often stick to old gold and silver. Most of 'em don't know how valuable it is... What are you trying to say, Fred?"

"Only that we know all this. We're looking round the area, of course, and making our own plans. Molly here can get an entrance through the front door of any farmhouse and any mansion... Let's waste no more time. I've got some stuff for you and if you've got down to the manufacture of Victorian jewellery we'll buy it. Victoriana is going big and we might as well cash in. But don't interfere and tell us how and when we're to operate... And that reminds me that we know you've got one or two real craftsmen making up this fake stuff. Why don't you put them in touch with us so that we can work together without bringing you into it? You'll know what's going in and coming out obviously. It's just that I might have a quick chance of a big sale of rings or bracelets and if I knew who was making them and got a stock I could pick them up quickly and do a deal without coming down here when it was inconvenient for you."

During this speech Edwards looked at the Major with astonishment and when he had finished he got up and laughed in his face.

"You must be feeling the strain, Fred. What's the matter with him, Molly? You don't know? Neither do I except that he's getting shaky. Now get this, both of you. We are on to a good racket and we won't have any more of this sort of nonsense. This is *my* show and I run it my way. You two work together as a team and you do it well enough if Fred stops talking nonsense and gets on with the job. You are the only two who work together. Not one of the other members of my team knows another because that's where danger lies... Let's have some straight talk. Molly goes round the country and investigates houses to see if there's anything worth nicking. If there is, I don't care what method you use in getting it as long as you don't get anyone else involved, and bring the stuff to me. I give you a fair price for gold and silver that can be melted down and remade with a lot of metal that isn't gold

and silver, don't I? And then I give you another chance to make money, Fred. I sell you the fake stuff at another fair price and you can sell that where you like as long as you don't get caught. It's easy, Fred, and you know it. Of course, the stuff we make hasn't got a hall-mark, but it's a very good imitation of the real thing as you know. Keep away from the reputable shops with what you have to sell, Fred, and don't tell me that you and Molly can't find a few who will buy from you to flog again in pubs and market places - specially nearer Christmas. But don't forget that I'm the one who directs this business and I don't believe you're so stupid as to think that I would let you know who else works for me... But I will tell you this just because I'm big-hearted. I've got nobody else at present doing your job. Not yet I haven't, but if ever you two made a mistake and found yourselves restricted in your movements, you would be replaced very easily... Now, what have you got to show me? And if you don't like the conditions under which I live and work here just get a move on and then you can trot back to your hotel until I find you a suitable country house... And don't keep anything back. It's risky to try and sell stolen property. Much better sell it to me to melt down and have it made into something fashionable but which isn't made of what it appears to be."

The Major gave him a rather feeble grin and produced from two big pockets inside his tweed jacket two gold bangles, an old-fashioned pocket watch with a gold case, three gold signet rings and three silver cigarette cases. His wife also produced a silver ashtray and some silver spoons. Edwards then weighed the gold and silver articles, examined them through a glass to see whether they all carried the legal hall-mark, opened the safe and passed over a large sum of money before putting the loot in a special compartment.

Next he unlocked a steel box and tipped out a dozen or so gleaming "curb" bracelets of "gold" chain links which were secured with a miniature padlock.

"These are a good line, Major. Very popular at the end of the last century and definitely 'in' now so far as fashion is concerned. You will find a ready market for these as they are marked '15-carat', and you will notice that the small key provided for each padlock has received special treatment and does *not* look new. So have the bracelets. Take these and let me know in a

day or two how you get on. The chap who made these is very skilful. Telephone me here before nine each morning and pay me now."

He then took back some of the money he had just paid to Graham and said casually:

"You've been in this town longer than I have. There's a good antique shop in the main street called *The Golden Lion*. Looks as if there's some very good stuff there. What do you think of it, Fred?"

"It's a good place and is selling some genuine Victoriana. I couldn't offer the present proprietor any of our special lines as he's too knowledgeable and would look at once for the hall-mark. I'll watch it, but the fellow told me he was selling the business and had got a man from London coming to see it... One other thing. There's a lot of foreign jewellery - sub-standard stuff of course - getting into the country. We might find ourselves up against some stiff competition."

"It's not old stuff, Fred - not Victoriana. I know all about it and if you think you can sell some to private individuals, let me know. I shall be able to supply you. I'm making arrangements. So long, Molly. Don't forget to let me have a careful record of your calls. I've got large-scale maps here, and as I have to do a bit of calling at big houses in the district in connection with my radio business, I'd like to know where you go. Keep busy both of you."

When the Grahams had gone, Edwards made some entries in a notebook before locking it in his desk. He was a careful, methodical man and not dissatisfied with his interview with the Grahams. They were experienced professional thieves who found it difficult to break away from him. If this area proved a waste of time he would move them on. They could operate anywhere while working for him, but he preferred them within reach. Fortunately he knew more about them than they knew about him - particularly his reason for moving out of Birmingham.

His next visitor was not due for an hour so he opened the safe again and examined some foreign jewellery of which he had recently taken delivery. He smiled to himself as he recalled Graham's remarks on this subject. Next

he made a telephone call to Bristol using the instrument on his desk, the number of which was unlisted, and afterwards made himself a cup of tea before settling down to a nap.

He was wakened by three rings on the door-bell.

The man waiting on the step this time was not like the Grahams. There was no polish about him. Tall and thin with stooping shoulders, he had a narrow, colourless face, a black moustache, sideboards and straggling beard. His eyes were bright and dark and his sensitive well-shaped hands showed nicotine-stained fingers. Name, Charlie Smith.

"Come in, Charlie. Pleased to see you," Edwards said as he led the way through the shop. "I want to know how you're settling in and what the output is. How are you getting on? If you play your cards right and do as I say you should be O.K. The fuzz (*Criminals' slang for Police*) won't think of looking for you in that dead and alive hole. Not unless they're given a hint, anyway."

"I don't like that kind o' talk," Charlie whined as he lit a cigarette and hungrily sucked in the smoke. "I'm doing what I can for you an' I've brought some stuff, but I've got to have more of it. I'm workin' too cheap for you, and I've got wife trouble as well. She can't stick the place. Says it's too lonely and the people in the village are asking questions. I don't like it. Too risky. She's got to go into the village to shop sometimes, hasn't she?"

"I reckon she has," Edwards conceded doubtfully. "All the same, Charlie, you've got to pull yourself together and do some plain talking to your missus. She knows you're wanted for that job in the jeweller's shop, doesn't she? O.K. then. Unless she wants you inside for several years she must do as you say. You've got to stay in hiding, keep quiet in the cottage and tell her to spread the story that you've been ill and taken the cottage for a good, quiet rest. Never go out in daylight, and when you're working be sure to keep the shutters up. We don't want anybody spying on you while you're at work. You can show me what you've been making in a minute and I'll pay you. It's up to you, Charlie. You produce the goods and you'll make the money for a fresh start somewhere else. I'll help you do that... Nobody's been nosing round that cottage, have they?"

"Not likely," Charlie agreed. "It's like living in a graveyard."

"That's O.K. then. That's why you're there. Not even a country copper would guess that Charlie the metalworker and craftsman can produce his best work in a place without electricity, could he? Only experts like us, Charlie, know that little furnace you brought with you will melt down anything you need to work on with methane gas just as well as electricity or coal or natural gas. Next time I come in the van I'll bring you some more cylinders. Now let's see how you've been getting on."

Charlie lit another cigarette from the glowing butt of the last and produced two wash-leather bags from his jacket pockets. He emptied the contents of each in a separate pile on Edwards's desk and for a long minute neither man spoke. They both looked at the pile of Victorian mourning-rings on one side and the heap of gleaming curb bracelets nearby. Charlie looked at them with pride and his employer with concealed gratification, because these fakes were very good indeed.

He picked up one of the rings which was, in design, rather like one of the old-fashioned rings used to put round table napkins. The "gold" mourning-ring was of chased metal and between the two rims was a band of black. Edwards weighed it in his palm and then examined it with his jeweller's glass.

"Nice work, Charlie. Very nice. Marked 15 carat, but 9 carat, I suppose, and the extra weight made up with lead."

Charlie nodded. "There's twenty-four of them there, and one's as good as another. I've never made better and they're worth more than the last lot. Worth it to me and worth it to you... And if you'd move me out of that cottage I could work more quickly."

Edwards counted the rings and bracelets, and when Charlie agreed he returned the leather bags to him and put the fakes in the safe. Then he spoke.

"Yes, Charlie. I'll give you more because the work is good and I want to encourage you. Take this cash now and I'll bring the balance over in a day

or two with some more gold and silver for melting down. I know you've got enough to get on with. I've given you some advice and I'll help you get out of the cottage when I can find you somewhere better. Have a talk with your wife and show her which side her bread is buttered. Keep out of sight and don't come here again. I'll come to you. If you're in real trouble get the missus to telephone me at this number. I'll be along, but don't forget that although we're useful to each other I'm more useful to you at present. I'll see you through this bit of trouble but don't do anything silly over in that cottage. Get back by bus. I'd give you a lift but it's not wise for us to be seen together."

Charlie counted the notes he had been given and seemed agreeably surprised and made no attempt to argue.

As soon as he had bolted the shop door behind him, Edwards went back to his desk and studied the maps again. Charlie Smith was the best craftsman he knew, but there was another man in London on whom he had some claims and who might be persuaded to live in country air if the inducement were strong enough. Perhaps a trip to London would be worthwhile soon? Perhaps a substitute for Charlie would be advisable? But so much depended on finding better accommodation for members of his team within easy reach of his new headquarters here, and he decided, as it was early closing day in Ludlow, to make another tour of exploration through Clun and towards the Welsh border.

He locked up carefully and strolled down Primrose Lane to his hired garage, got out the van and drove into the town. There were plenty of tourists about but as he passed *The Golden Lion* he noticed that the blinds had not been pulled down and that two or three people were looking at the display in the window. He stopped the van. This was a good opportunity to see what class of business was done here and to note such details as vulnerability of doors and windows. So, with his hands in his pockets he strolled along the pavement just as the tourists moved on.

The display was attractive and certainly genuine and would be expensive. There were a few pictures, some elegant furniture, a little silver and some beautiful china - but no jewellery. Edwards moved towards the door so that he could look into the shop. Just inside he saw three men talking together.

One, almost facing him, was almost certainly the proprietor, and he was smiling down at an elderly man dressed in an old-fashioned check suit and wearing a brown hat with a curly brim. The third man, who was obviously the latter's companion, had his back to the door. He was hatless with white hair.

But there was something about this man's stance that nagged at Edwards's memory. Suddenly the man turned round and with only a few feet and a glass door separating them, these two recognized each other again. The bare-headed man in the shop now staring at him was the man who had ordered him off the premises at the house called Witchend. With a muttered curse, Edwards turned away and hurried back to his van.

4. Thursday: The Birdwatcher

After her first night under canvas, Harriet woke before either of the twins. She turned and glanced at Mary who was sleeping peacefully and thought again how lucky she was to have such wonderful friends, to be a member of this exciting club and to have so much to look forward to. Then she heard an odd little whining noise followed by a gentle thudding. She managed to sit up, and there was Macbeth curled up at the bottom of Mary's sleeping-bag watching her while his tail beat a little tattoo of welcome. She smiled at him and put a finger to her lips, and he tucked his head down again but did not close his eyes. Harriet looked at the watch on her wrist - one of the many useful presents given her by her grandfather - and saw that the time was five-to-seven. For ten minutes she lay back blissfully with her hands behind her head, half hoping that Mary would wake and suggest something exciting, like lighting the camp-fire and cooking bacon. The very thought of fresh fried bacon made her mouth water, but then she remembered that they were supposed to wash and have breakfast at Witchend, and that reminded her of Peter. And thinking of Peter, who had always been so nice to her, made her think of Peter's Rock and the helicopter, of the green light they saw last night, and of how Dickie had sworn her to secrecy about all this. All the same, it would be fun to see the rock again in daylight, and suddenly she made up her mind to go out now, by herself, and explore.

Very, very carefully she wriggled out of the bag without waking Mary and crawled out of the tent, grabbing on the way her jeans and sweater. As, with fingers shaking in excitement, she tried to fasten the tent flaps behind her, a cold black nose was thrust into her hand and Macbeth followed her out into the sunshine. Still on her knees, she kissed the top of his shaggy head and then looked at Dickie's tent. No sign of life there except a gentle purring sound, which to Harriet's amusement proved that the aggressive young journalist-to-be actually snored.

As she stood up and scrambled into her clothes, she realized that she had left her sandals in the tent. She giggled to herself at the delicious feel of cool dew on her toes and decided to explore in bare feet.

She whistled softly to Macbeth and crawled up the narrow track between the gorse which Peter had cut back yesterday. She had not gone far before she regretted leaving her sandals, but she persevered, and when she was clear of the undergrowth and on the track the pine needles were cool and slippery under her bare feet. She had no need to go far before she found a place where she could look right down at Witchend and then right across Stretton Vale to the long ridge of Wenlock Edge and the bulk of the two Clees which she knew were not far from Ludlow.

She leaned against a tree and wondered at the silence. No bird sang, and although she could see the sparkle of the brook in front of the house below, she could not hear its music. The early-morning mist was clearing a little now as the sun gained power. Mackie wandered back to her and surprisingly licked her bare toes.

"Come on, Mackie," she laughed. "We'll go a little farther up the hill until we can see Peter's Rock in daylight."

She could not walk quickly in bare feet, but they were soon clear of the wood and she could see the great rock against the skyline.

The green light at the cottage that the twins said was haunted was rather peculiar and so was the helicopter. As they had hurried back to the camp in the moonlight last night, Dickie had been particularly excited, and although Harriet knew that they both tended to exaggerate whatever happened, or whatever anybody said to them, he made her swear not to tell David or Peter what they had seen and heard. And she had sworn a Lone Pine oath and knew that as soon as he was awake Dickie would be laying more plans and giving more orders. But it had been an odd thing to happen in such a lonely place. Perhaps somebody was living in the cottage that was supposed to be deserted?

Her feet were sore now and, turning back, she found it more painful going downhill than coming up, and was glad to stop in the place where she had looked down at Witchend twenty minutes ago. Then she heard Mary's clear voice calling Macbeth. The Scottie cocked his ears, gave Harriet a look that might have been of apology, and dashed down the track to his mistress.

When Harriet crawled into the camp again he was snarling playfully and rolling on the grass between the tents with Mary, while Dickie, still half asleep and in his pyjamas, was crawling out of his tent.

"You gone mad?" he shouted at his twin. "Can't you keep quiet? It's practically the middle of the night on the first day of what the best people call the vacation, and you can't let a chap sleep on a bit. Will you just shut up and keep that dog quiet."

"Don't be ridiculous," Mary said as she sat up and pulled Macbeth on to her lap. "It's time to get up and this dog has been a traitor and gone off with Harry. He deserted me and I'll never, never, never forgive him. Will I ever forgive you, my darling little black warrior? Yes, I will. Of course I will. Like it says in the Bible, I'll forgive him unto seventy times seven just as long as he comes back to me... So there you are, Harry. You don't know how silly you look crouching there on all fours. Where have you been?"

"I've been for a walk. Just a stroll up the side of the wood. Mackie came with me. He likes me very much."

"Did you tempt him and lure him?" Mary asked as she pushed back her hair. "And why didn't you wait for us, might we ask?"

"You may ask," Harriet said tartly. "I went by myself because you were asleep and I didn't want to wake you. I wonder you could sleep actually because Dickie was snoring. It was a disgusting noise... Swinish," she added triumphantly.

"Is that so?" Dickie said as he came over to her. "Swinish is a good word. I must remember it and use it when the opportunity occurs. Thank you, Harriet. Have you seen anything or anybody unusual in your wanderings?"

"No, nothing at all, though I've been thinking about last night... What's the matter, Dickie? You're looking fiercely at me."

"I feel fierce, Harry. You swore an oath and don't you forget it. You swore not to mention to *anyone* anything about what we saw last night. This is our adventure and *that suits us, Harry*. We got you into this club and you gotta

be loyal to the younger members. We're going exploring today on our own and we're not telling anyone where we're going. You do understand, don't you?"

Harriet nodded. "Of course I do. Don't worry, Dickie, but you must allow me to do things by myself sometimes. And the older ones are in the club too."

Mary stood up and gave her the famous twin smile.

"Don't take too much notice of him, Harry. The biggest promise in our rules buried in the tin right under the tree down there is that we are all true to each other whatever happens. It's only that Dickie and me are rather different and we like you with us."

Mackie suddenly stood alert with his head on one side. "He can hear someone coming. Perhaps it's David and Peter. They will whistle the call."

A minute later they heard it, and suddenly Brock dashed into the camp and rushed excitedly at Macbeth, and while the dogs were playing together Peter and David arrived.

"Good morning, both," Dickie said brightly. "If you are going to ask us to breakfast the answer is 'Yes, please, and thank you'. But why isn't Petronella down there cooking everything?"

"Because we couldn't keep away from the twins, little man," David replied for her. "How did you sleep, Harry? Any excitements?"

"It was marvellous," Harriet said truthfully. "I woke first and Mackie and I went for a walk tiptoeing through the dew. Can I help you with the cooking down at the house, Peter, after I've washed?"

"My father will have done most of the cooking by the time we're ready," Peter smiled. "Sometimes he doesn't like anyone interfering with him, but he might like to be asked. He's not very fit, but you twins always cheer him up."

"I'll hurry and come with you," Mary suggested. "David and Dickie can clear up here and that will make a nice change!"

When the three girls had taken the dogs back to the house, the brothers worked companionably together tidying the camp. Dickie was on his knees clearing up the ashes as David checked that there was enough kindling under the old groundsheet to keep them going when they next wanted a fire.

"Peter cut this lot for you," he said. "Don't run out of fuel, my lad."

Dickie nodded. "O.K.... What's the matter with Peter's dad, David?"

"Not sure. Peter is fussed about him. He's worried but we're not sure exactly why or what about. Try and cheer him up at breakfast."

"We'll do that, but it's not so funny if the person you want to cheer doesn't want to be cheered. We like Papa Sterling, except that I'm always scared he'll think I'm untidy... And so I am," he added thoughtfully before David could remind him.

Five minutes later Dickie collected a shirt and sweater from his tent and they went down to Witchend together. Peter and her father were in the kitchen, Harriet was trying to lay the table, Macbeth and Brock were gambolling about and getting under everybody's feet, and Mary was singing in the bathroom. Dickie had to wait for her to come out, so he was the last down.

There had been one occasion when he had called Mr Sterling "Pop Sterling" to his face. He had been ready to do anything to cheer their old friend, but this morning he quickly decided not to use that particular method. It was obvious, even without David's warning, that the object of their concern had not got his mind on his breakfast or on his young companions. And because they all noticed this, general conversation which used to be deafening at times lapsed into frequent silences, the longest of which was unexpectedly broken by Mr Sterling himself who, after a meaningful look at his daughter, said,

"And what are you all going to do today? Arrangements must be made about meals."

Peter looked quickly at David before answering her father.

"No need for you to worry about us, Dad. If the twins and Harriet want to go off on their own there's plenty of food in the larder. I've been stocking up for weeks. And if you don't mind I'd like to take David off on an expedition. We thought we'd walk down to Onnybrook and then get a bus to Ludlow. I'd like to show him the stables and then-----"

At that moment the telephone rang and Peter ran to answer it.

"Don't you worry about us, Mr Sterling," said Dickie. "Harriet, Mary and I have made our own arrangements. Is that not so, Mary?"

"It is so, Richard. We are all organized," confirmed his sister. Then Peter came back.

"It's Mr Sparrow, Dad. He wants to speak to Harry but he's got a special message for you. I told him you weren't very keen on the telephone but he says he wants to meet you, get your advice on some of the towns and villages round here, and to ask about *The Golden Lion*. So, if you're agreeable he's coming over to fetch you presently in a hired car and you're to spend the day with him and he'll send you back in the car... I said I was sure you'd like to go, and you would, wouldn't you? It's a specially good idea as we shall all be going out for the day."

"That is very civil of Mr Sparrow, my dear. I shall be delighted to accept. Will you please thank your grandfather on my behalf, Harriet."

Harriet ran to the telephone, gave the message and then treated her grandfather to an ecstatic account of her first night under canvas in the super sleeping-bag and of her morning barefoot walk with Macbeth.

When she came back the atmosphere round the breakfast table was less tense, and it seemed that Mr Sterling was relieved at the idea of getting away from Witchend for a few hours. They all helped with clearing the

table and washing-up and then set about cutting sandwiches and packing all sorts of exciting food into rucksacks. This was something which Harriet never did in London. Sometimes her parents took her out for a meal, and more often her grandfather did so when he took her to places like Hampton Court and Greenwich, but packed meals prepared at home and eaten in the country were an exciting novelty to her.

David, Peter and Brock went off first, and ten minutes later the next expedition was ready. Mr Sterling adjusted the straps of Harriet's rucksack so that it settled comfortably on her back, and came to the gate to see them off.

"If you get back first you know where the key is hidden, Richard. Usual place under the brick by the rainwater tank. Where are you taking your friend?"

"We'll go up to the top first," Mary said. "Harry has never seen the valleys so we may come back a long way round - or p'raps along the top and down at Plowden. Have a nice day and give our love to Grandpa Sparrow."

Not until they had reached Peter's Rock did Harriet ask them what they really thought was the meaning of the helicopter and the light they had seen on Beacon Cottage last night.

"I don't know," Dickie admitted. "When you see the top of the Mynd you'll understand how easy it is for a 'copter to land there. Gliders land on the top every day. Anyway, what we saw last night was peculiar and I'm sure Peter is right about Beacon Cottage being empty. So what's going on? What to do?... You see, Harry, I really am keen on being a journalist, and James has told me that a good journalist always investigates anything unusual. And I want to learn to do things on my own. If we'd told David and Peter about what we saw they might have gone up there first."

"And even if they'd said we would all go together, that would have been too many for Dickie," Mary said. "Maybe something is happening that we can't manage for ourselves, but we might as well look round first. We always do if we can, Harry. See what we mean? Good. Now we'll show you a bit of our mountain."

Although Peter's Rock was high enough for them to see the summit of the Mynd marked by the stone trig point half a mile or so beyond Beacon Cottage, it took them nearly an hour to reach the actual plateau along which ran, from north to south, the ancient track known as the Port Way. Harriet was not such a good walker as the twins, and to her every step along the narrow track between either heather or bilberries was exciting. Again she was conscious of the almost uncanny silence, and although Dickie several times pointed out hovering falcons and once a curlew in the distance, the only birds to attract attention by their song were the little inconspicuous, brown meadow-pipits fluttering low over the heather and making a melancholy piping. Once, Mary pointed out a small herd of wild ponies browsing near a boggy patch of green where one of the Mynd's countless streams of clear water was born, and twice the silence was broken by the curious whistling of a glider as it swooped down and landed on the bare levels over to the south of the gliding station club-house. Only above the moors of north Yorkshire had Harriet seen such a vast bowl of blue sky across which white, billowy clouds chased each other from the west and cast racing shadows across the heather.

The twins did not have much to say until the Port Way and Beacon Cottage were well in sight. Oddly enough, as they approached the sun was suddenly hidden behind dark rain clouds, the wind strengthened and drops of rain stung their faces.

"It often comes quickly like this," Mary said as she pulled up the hood of her anorak. "Everything looks different in a few seconds. The cottage looks different and, as Peter said, a bit ghostly. We'd better shelter there, Dickie. Let's run."

As Peter had told them last night the house, and quite a large area of land around it, was bounded by rows of stunted beech trees and a fence of rusty, large-mesh wire. The winds of more than half a century had dwarfed these trees and bent their tortured branches into twisted signposts pointing eastwards. On the left of the house was a rough track which once had been a drive leading into a grass-grown yard surrounded on three sides by sheds and an old stable.

As Dickie raced ahead up this untidy drive, Harriet had time to see the shuttered windows staring out, as Peter had said, like blind eyes. The walls of the house which had gleamed white in the moonlight were now seen to be scarred with dark patches where the paint had long ago peeled from the stone walls. She looked up and saw between two gabled windows on the first floor a narrow ledge where perhaps a lamp, first yellow and then green, had signalled to the pilot of a helicopter last night. She saw too that several slates were missing from the roof, and as the twins pulled her into the comparative shelter of the doorway of one of the sheds she shivered with distaste and noticed that Macbeth, standing with drooping tail between the twins, was shaking too.

The back of the house which they were now facing was even more depressing than the front. The weeds of years were rampant and an old pump in the centre of the yard was red with rust.

Then suddenly the sun came out again and the only sound was the trickle of water falling down the walls from broken gutters and a few anxious whines from Mackie.

Dickie spoke first.

"I hate this place. It's been dead for years, and yet we know that somebody was here last night signalling to a 'copter. We didn't dream it, and I want to look round and see what we can find. If somebody was here they must have left some sign, so will you two and Mackie come with me? I know you hate it and this is a bit tough on Harry, but if we all stick together and search we'll finish quicker, shan't we?"

"O.K.," Mary said. "It's an utterly loathsome place but I'll tell you something right away, twin. I can smell oil. Paraffin. Sniff, Harry, close to the door."

Harriet did so and agreed. The door was fastened with a padlock, but when Dickie examined it closely he found traces of oil on it. This was the best clue they found, but with this certain knowledge that somebody had used the place recently they did find a few more suspicious signs round the back door, including an oil stain on the stone step. The doors of the stable were

also padlocked, and all the windows were boarded over so that it was impossible to see into any of these sheds.

"People only use 'copters if they want to drop something or pick somebody up," Dickie said excitedly. "S'pose somebody was hiding here last night and knew the 'copter was coming at a certain time to drop something he wanted? Just suppose that. What would he do? I'll tell you. Even though it was moonlight, he'd show a light to mark the spot for the pilot and make it green when he was ready for the drop."

"You mean he'd put an oil lantern on the ground?" Harriet asked. "We know where he keeps the oil but I think he showed the light high up on the house. On the roof, maybe, or on the ledge I saw between two upstairs windows in the front of the house. Let's go and see how he could get up there."

The twins were impressed by the new recruit's observation and told her so as they ran round to the front of the house with Macbeth at their heels. Dickie agreed at once that the ledge would make an admirable place for a signal lamp, but although the windows on each side were boarded over, the easy way out to the ledge would perhaps be through another from inside the house.

"If only we could climb up to that ledge, I bet we'd find a certain clue," Dickie said. "We haven't explored the other side of the house yet. Let's see if there's anything there to help us."

There was. A ladder lay half hidden in the weeds along the wall. They struggled to lift it, but although they managed to get it off the ground and carry it a few feet, they realized that not even their combined efforts would be enough to raise it against the wall under the windows. Dickie was scarlet in the face with frustration, when they heard Macbeth bark furiously from the front of the house.

"That's his warning bark," Mary said. "Push the beastly ladder back where we found it, Dickie. There's somebody there. Shall we hide or see who it is?"

"We're not trespassing if the place is empty," Dickie said doubtfully. "Let's go and see. We've not done any damage."

Harriet tried unsuccessfully to banish the thought of a big man with a gun who was really the owner of the cottage and who would shoot Mackie first and then report them to the police for trespassing.

It was not a big man with a gun but a small, plump man dressed in a tweed jacket, breeches and hat to match. Round his neck hung a pair of large binoculars, and he was watching Macbeth with some apprehension as the little dog pranced round barking defiance to somebody he obviously considered to be an intruder. When the stranger saw the three children he called to them in a rather squeaky voice.

"Is this your dog? Call him off, if you please. At once. And who are you and what are you doing here?"

Harriet gulped with relief and the twins smiled at each other as Mary called Macbeth, who came to her at once.

The plump man removed his tweed hat and mopped his forehead.

"Thank you," he said. "I'm sure he means well but I thought this place was deserted. Surely you don't live here?"

Mary agreed that they did not, but the binoculars suggested a simple conversational gambit.

"Can we ask whether you, like ourselves, are interested in birds? We're on holiday but we've been here before and behind this old house there are a lot of pools and marshy ground. We thought we might see something exciting. If you are keen p'raps we could show you and perhaps you could give us some valuable advice?"

The stranger beamed at them and admitted that he had come to the Long Mynd for the very purpose of watching birds and exploring the country. He did not tell them his name, but he was interested to walk round with them and was friendly and impressed when Mary told him how falcons were

trained here by the R.A.F. in the last war, and also when Dickie spotted a curlew in flight. He asked them a lot of questions when he realized how well they knew the country - where they lived, whether Beacon Cottage was the only house on the Mynd and whether there were many visitors about at this time of the year. He was also interested in the gliding station and thanked them courteously as they strolled back together to the road where he had left a blue Mini.

"Goodbye to you all," he said as he unlocked the door. "And thank you for what you have told me. I'm not often lucky enough to find intelligent birdwatchers of your age. I must get on now, but I shall certainly come back here again one day."

"We must get home too," Dickie announced abruptly. "Cheerio, and thanks for letting me watch the curlew through your super binocs," and he led the girls and Macbeth quickly across the road along the track through the heather.

"What's the hurry, twin?" Mary protested. "You gone mad or something? Nothing the matter with that old buffer, was there? He's turning the car now."

"Maybe he is," Dickie said in his conspiratorial voice out of the side of his mouth. "Maybe, but I don't trust birdwatchers, although I admit he knew about birds. I just want to see if he comes back to the cottage as soon as we're out of sight."

Dickie was right. After another hundred yards he pulled them into a hollow and then crawled up until he could see the road to the cottage. Sure enough, within a few minutes the blue Mini returned. They saw the little birdwatcher get out and walk up the drive to the cottage. Dickie looked at his watch and it was twelve minutes before the man reappeared and drove off in the opposite direction.

"There you are," Dickie smirked. "Let's eat now right here. I've got a story for James even if nothing else happens... Funny thing, Harry, but you remember that one of our rules is that the club is for tracking strangers and watching birds? Of course you do. Now it's another funny thing, but this

stranger is also a birdwatcher, if you see what I mean. In our experience, Harry, people who say they are birdwatchers are often suspicious characters, and I think we're on to something. While we're eating and on our way home let's think what a 'copter might drop on the top of the Mynd that a birdwatcher would want."

Between them they made some outrageous suggestions, but after their meal they slept in the sun for a while, and to Harriet's relief Dickie never once suggested that they should return to Beacon Cottage. There were no more rain storms, and when they were rested the twins took her back to Witchend down one of the lovely valley paths where a stream kept them company, and the hillsides, thick with bracken, closed in on them on each side.

They were hungry and thirsty again when they got home. "Nobody back yet," Mary said. "Let's have tea in the house. I'll get the key from under the brick."

No sooner had she disappeared round the side of the house when Dickie heard the telephone ringing in the hall and shouted for his sister to hurry. It was still ringing when he snatched the key from her, opened the door and picked up the receiver.

"Hello. Hello! Who is it?" they heard him demand in a hoarse voice. "No. Mr Sterling is absent. So is his daughter. Why should I tell you who I am if you don't tell me who you are? Yes - this is Witchend and I'm not alone. The place is crowded-----"

Then Harriet, fearful lest the caller be somebody wanting to know whether it was safe to break into the house, watched Dickie excitedly as the expression on his face changed.

"Is that so?" he said, after a pause, in what he sometimes called his adult voice. "You are actually speaking to Mr Morton."

5. Thursday: News As Usual

Harriet and Mary were on tiptoe with excitement when Dickie winked at them and repeated in his new grown-up voice, "That is so. Richard Morton is speaking, and you, I presume, are James Wilson of the *Clarion*!... Good afternoon, James. I have news for you as usual... No really, James. Mary and Harriet Sparrow are with me and we've had a fantastic day. Where are you and when are you coming over? Tonight? Smashing! Mr Sterling is in Ludlow, we believe, with Grandpa Sparrow, and David and Peter are mooning about somewhere but they'll all be back soon. Of course it will be O.K. - I'll tell them and we'll prepare a banquet... Where are you? Shrewsbury? Jolly good... See you."

He replaced the receiver and Mary said,

"Don't bother to tell us that was James Wilson and you've got news for him, but what was that about a banquet? You know how fussed Mr Sterling gets and we don't know what's in the larder except tins."

"James will have to chew tins with us then," Dickie grinned as he staggered into the sitting-room and sank into a chair. "I'm absolutely exhausted with news gathering and showing Harry round Shropshire. Why don't you two girls just nip round and rustle up some tea. Flavons of tea and brown bread and butter and lots of Pop Sterling's honey will keep me going."

"Don't you worry, chum," his twin assured him. "We're going to have our tea in the kitchen. You'll hear us when we're ready and can come and fetch yours. Come on, Harry."

Dickie closed his eyes and treated them to an enormous snore, but had hardly settled down before a shout from Harriet brought him to his feet.

"Quick, Dickie. Come here. Somebody has broken into the larder."

The Witchend larder led out of the kitchen and had one small window overlooking the yard at the back of the house. Mary and Harriet were

standing just inside the larder and turned to him as he ran into the kitchen. Mary pointed to the floor where several tins had fallen, together with a china cheese dish now smashed to fragments. The bread bin was open and there were pieces of crust on one of the shelves.

"This is awful, Dickie," Mary whispered. "What will Mr Sterling say? Whoever got in here must have been starving because they started eating before they got out... And look. Here's a glass from the kitchen that has had milk in it. Who could it be? Mr Sterling is so neat and we know the house was locked. Strangers don't come this way. And the window is still open. I'm sure such an awful thing has never happened round here before. Why did they come here? Perhaps it was somebody who was lost on the hill?"

"Or somebody who came in a helicopter maybe," Dickie said with relish. "Lucky old James is going to walk straight into a story. What we want up here is a Z-car and a Police Task Force. That's what we want. Fingerprints all over that glass. Don't touch it. I'll go and telephone."

"Wait, Dickie, please." Harriet caught his arm. "It's not really for me to say, but surely you see that we ought not to do anything until Mr Sterling gets back. And there's another thing. No grown-up could have squeezed through that window. It's too small. I could only just manage it. Why don't we look outside first, because whoever got in here this afternoon might not have been a criminal. I think it was a very hungry, frightened boy or girl, but maybe we'd better look upstairs first and make sure nothing valuable has been taken."

She did not add that she was terrified of the idea of going upstairs and searching all the bedrooms in case the intruder was hiding there, but when she looked at the twins she was sure that they had the same idea.

"That is very clever of you, Harry," Dickie said. "Of course the window isn't big enough for a grown-up. The sitting-room was as shipshape as Pop Sterling left it, and so is the kitchen by the look of it."

"Try the kitchen door into the yard, twin. Is it still bolted on the inside?"

Dickie ran over and tested it.

"Yes, that's O.K. So whoever it was got out the same way, unless they used the front door... Shall we look outside first and then go upstairs?"

Both girls heard the strain in his voice, but Mary solved the problem.

"It would be a lie to say I'm not scared," she admitted. "My heart is thumping most uncomfortable, but we've got to go upstairs first. We've forgotten darling Mackie. Let's all go up together and push him in each room first. I'm sure it's all right really, because if any stranger was in the house our brave dog would have made a fearful fuss. He didn't even follow us in here and I don't know where he is."

Macbeth was asleep on a sunny patch on the sitting-room carpet and showed signs of resentment when Mary woke him and gave him instructions. The stairs of this old house were very steep and one of the family - usually Mary - always carried him up, but when she obliged on this occasion he was obviously puzzled because it was not even bedtime. Although it was unnecessary, they crept upstairs and Harriet found herself clutching Dickie's hand so hard that he struggled to release it. They stood on the landing in silence while Macbeth looked at them as if he thought they were crazy. Then suddenly Dickie gulped, and said in a loud if not very firm voice,

"If there's anybody hiding up here they'd better come out. We've got a fierce dog and we're going to search this place right now... Come on, Mackie! See them out, boy!"

The dog recognized the last words and wagged his tail expectantly, but he found nothing as Mary opened every door upstairs and urged him into each room before they followed. Then Dickie remembered the attic and the girls agreed that as he had been silly enough to think of it, he should go up the ladder first. This he did without much fuss, and finding nothing they all went downstairs with the certainty that no starving child was hiding in the house.

Outside, they saw at once that a wooden sawing block used by Mr Sterling for cutting logs had been dragged across the yard and left under the larder window. Harriet climbed on this, and as there were no marks of forcible

entry on the paintwork it was obvious that the larder window had not been properly closed on the inside.

"It's horrible to think we've got to lock every window now," Mary said. "We've never had to do it before. Everybody round here knows everybody else. I don't want any tea now. Let's run over to Ingles and tell them what's happened. They might have seen somebody in the lane. See that all the windows are properly closed and then we'll leave Mackie in the house to keep guard."

Mr Ingles was milking and Tom was still in the harvest fields, but Mrs Ingles was in the kitchen as usual and welcomed them warmly. After explaining that they had been on the hill all day, and that the others would be back soon, Mary said, "I s'pose, Aunt Betty, you wouldn't have happened to see a starving child walking about round here? Or asking you for food or drink?"

"What are you talking about, Mary? There aren't any starving children round these parts, although I've never known young Dickie here anything but hungry. I reckon you're making fun of me... No, love. I've seen no child but, come to think of it, Alf was saying only at breakfast that there seem to be a crowd o' strangers about."

While she chattered on, Harriet slipped out of the room, hoping to find Tom. Although she had suggested that nobody should be told before Mr Sterling returned, it was obvious that the Ingles would have to know sooner or later, and she wondered whether Tom up on the fields or about the farmyard had seen a strange child. Beside, she wanted to know when Jenny was coming over. As soon as she was outside she saw him coming down the field by the hedge and ran to meet him.

He was pleased to see her, and after he had told her that he was going to telephone Jenny later, she told him what had happened at Witchend.

"Well, well," he said. "Sure there's nothing else but a bit o' grub taken? Larder window, eh? You're right, Harry. Nobody much bigger than you could squeeze through that, and you're pint size! Come to think of it, I did see a kid in the lane this afternoon. I was up there and too far off to see

what he looked like... Couldn't be sure that it was a boy. Can't tell these days what with long hair and trousers and all... I got the feeling he was a stranger and I reckon he was going towards Witchend. This will upset old man Sterling and he's not looking too happy anyway. Peter's worried about him. Have they told Uncle Alf yet?"

"I don't know. The twins will have told your aunt by now. I thought I'd like to tell you before the others arrive... Look, Tom! There's a red car coming up the lane. It's James Wilson's Triumph, I'm sure - I remember it. And Peter and David. Lucky they've come before Mr Sterling. We must tell them at once."

She ran ahead of Tom to greet them.

James, bare-headed, tanned and as handsome as ever, got out of the car as Harry ran across the farmyard.

"Hello, Harriet. Nice to see you again. Lucky I met the others down by the level crossing else I'd never have found my way. Not staying here are you? Where are those horrible twins?"

Peter, with Brock on her lap, waved to her and asked a more important question.

"Have a good day, Harry? Is my father home yet? I asked James to stop at Ingles to make sure he wasn't here."

Harriet shook her head and then introduced Tom to James as the twins ran round the side of the house.

"Hello, James," Dickie panted. "We've got news for everybody. We've told Uncle Alf and Aunt Betty and we can see Tom knows."

"What are you talking about?" David said. "What's happened now?"

"Give me a chance, mate. Witchend has been broken into by a starving boy or girl as the case may be. Got in through the larder window and consumed piles of food. Mackie is on guard but the others wouldn't let me telephone

for the Task Force... There's not room for any more in the car so we'll run on."

Peter grabbed Harriet's arm.

"Is that true, Harry? Really true? Not one of their tricks? Get in the back with David... Tom! If my father calls in to see you first please don't tell him about this... And do come round after supper to see us."

Tom nodded as James got into the car and started the engine. Then he turned away to find his uncle and aunt and see what they thought of it all. What a day! Poor old Sterling.

The twins trotted up the middle of the narrow lane so that the car could not pass them, and then opened the Witchend gate so that James could drive in. They heard Macbeth barking inside the house at the sound of the car, so Mary grabbed the key from Dickie and ran to reassure him.

"Come and see where the starving child got into the house," the latter suggested. "You come, James. This is your lucky day because you're on the scene of the crime before the police. We haven't looked for footprints or fingerprints yet."

Peter was very upset when she saw what had happened, and after they had examined the kitchen and larder, and Harriet had told them that Tom had seen a child in the lane some hours ago, she took them into the sitting-room.

"I'm so sorry this has happened as soon as you've arrived, James. I've never known any house or cottage round here to be broken into. Never - and that's why it's specially worrying... You all know that my father is worried and not very well, so as he's not home yet I suggest we don't tell him what's happened - not as soon as he arrives anyway. I would be grateful, so let's get the supper ready and see how he is when he comes."

When James went out to fetch his suitcase from the car, Dickie followed him.

"When are you going to tell me what you're after in Birmingham, James? I'm still keen and I really have got something for you."

"Good show, Richard. I'll tell you about this trip presently. Have I turned up at a bad time? What's going on here? Peter's fussed about her father, isn't she? Is it really O.K. for me to stay tonight? I wanted to see you all - and Witchend too - but I don't want to be in the way. What's wrong with Mr Sterling? I know this house belongs to your family. David told me all about that but I've never met Peter's father."

"He's marvellous. He likes everything shipshape and he likes twins which is lucky for us, but something happened just before we arrived which upset him. David knows because Peter will have told him, but we've hardly seen him since we arrived. We only came yesterday. I'm sure you'll like him, James."

"Sure to if he likes twins. Now tell me, Richard. Did you know that the house had been entered when I telephoned? Was that the story you had for me?"

"No. Mary and Harriet and me had an adventure out on the mountain late last night, and today we've been up there to explore and discovered some very mysterious things, including an old birdwatcher type whose behaviour was most suspicious. There was a helicopter over the mountain last night, James, and somebody up there was signalling to it. Honestly, I've got a story for you."

"Good old Richard. We must hear this story, but why are you excited about a birdwatcher?"

"Because they're always sinister. We've had several in our lives, James, and they're hardly ever what they seem... Gosh! Look what's coming. It's Mr Sterling in a whacking great limousine. Of course, he's been out with Harry's grandfather. Come and meet him."

The big car glided in beside the dusty Triumph. A chauffeur in a peaked cap descended with dignity from the driving seat and opened the door for Mr

Sterling, who seemed slightly startled by this ceremony, and even more surprised when Dickie bowed low from the waist and declared:

"Welcome to Witchend, kind sir! Behold, your servants await you."

It was then the chauffeur's turn to look surprised as Mary, who looked exactly like the boy, led a procession of young people running out of the house.

"Not at all, sir. It's been a pleasure," the chauffeur replied as Mr Sterling thanked him, and then tried to maintain his dignity as Dickie signalled him out of the gate like a policeman on point duty.

Peter gave her father a hug and then introduced him to James. She noticed that he was still strained, although he was charming and courteous to their visitor.

"Forgive me for not being here to welcome you, Mr Wilson. I've had an agreeable day with Harriet's grandfather. It's always a pleasure to introduce this country to appreciative friends, and no doubt Petronella has told you that I've spent all my life in these hills. I presume your young friends have shown you your room and we're all very happy to welcome you here and hope you will stay for a night or two if it suits you. Richard, I am sure, is anxious to know what has brought you to Birmingham."

"Thank you very much, Mr Sterling. I'll be glad to tell you presently. It's also possible that some of you can help me, and I've just heard that the twins and Harriet have got a story too."

"We'll have supper first, if you please," Peter said firmly, and led her father into the house.

An hour later, when the sun was sinking behind the Mynd, they left the supper table for the sitting-room and David brought in an enormous coffee pot and a tray of cups.

"Now, James," he said. "Out with it. What are you up to and how can we help? Why are you particularly interested in this country? Come clean."

"There's nothing particularly secret about what I'm investigating and I'll explain all that presently. You'll all understand that it won't help though if too many people round here know who I am and why I'm asking curious questions. I'm after information, but I can promise you that when my story exposes what's going on, it will do a lot of good... You can ask questions afterwards, but I've been sent to Birmingham by the *Clarion* to get a story about the fake jewellery racket which is causing a lot of concern. It would take too long to tell you the whole story, but an increasing amount of cheap jewellery is being marketed in Britain which is not what it is supposed to be. It is often marked 'Pure Silver' or 'Pure Gold' and it's nothing of the sort. Real gold and silver in small amounts is used in the manufacture of this rubbish, but the genuine precious metals are adulterated, or alloyed, with such base metals as copper and tin. The point is, that although most of this stuff looks like the genuine article and is sold as such at high prices, it is fake. The genuine jewellery trade is being undermined and the public is being swindled... I can see what you want to ask, David. You want to know how the public can be protected? How can you, for instance, if you want to buy Peter a brooch - or even a ring one day - be sure that what you are offered as 'pure' is the real article? Well, you can be certain. The word 'pure' means nothing, but in Britain the genuine article is always 'hallmarked' and is proof that anything made of gold and silver has been officially tested for fineness and quality. There are four qualities of gold marked in carats, and two of silver - sterling and Britannia. Reputable makers of gold and silver jewellery and other articles send what they make to one of the four Assay Offices in Britain where the metal is scientifically tested. If the quality is up to standard it is hall-marked by skilled craftsmen in the Assay Office and returned with this guarantee to the maker... Sorry about this long lecture, twins, but have you got the point of it all?"

"Yes, James," Dickie said. "But what are you doing?"

"I am trying to expose the swindle and I am working with the Assay Office in Birmingham who are concerned about what is happening because they exist to see that the law is enforced. They want to protect the public and safeguard the standards of the genuine manufacturers and jewellers."

David glanced at Peter who was watching her father while James was talking, and then said,

"There's something you haven't told us, isn't there, James? What's the connection between London and Birmingham? Do you mean there is one big gang working this racket? And what can we do for you?... Half a sec, Dickie. We know you've got a story but James told me in London that we might be able to help him. Your turn in a minute... Now come clean, James."

"I'm not really hiding anything. We've got information that one man - or possibly a syndicate - is employing dishonest craftsmen to work in one-room factories in the Midlands. This probably happens in London as well, but up to now the best craftsmen in the jewellery business were trained and worked in Birmingham. The Assay Office have recent evidence that instead of working in the back streets of the city, some are moving out into small provincial towns and even into the country."

"Like round here, for instance?" David suggested, and James nodded.

"Maybe. We're trying to prove a theory that the gangs responsible for the racket are splitting up into smaller groups, some of which are in the power and control of one man. So - and this goes for all of you while you're on holiday - if you see or hear of any suspicious strangers asking if a cottage is for sale, even in very remote parts of the countryside, please let me know. I'll be centred in Birmingham for a while and will give you a telephone number... Now I've come clean and my young colleague is getting purple in the face. Speak up, Richard, and tell us what you've been up to."

Dickie told the story of their adventure last night and of their visit to Beacon Cottage, with only trivial interruptions from Mary. Harriet was so excited that she sat, white-faced, with her hands clasped in her lap while the story of the sinister birdwatcher was unfolded. Before Dickie could give a description of the tweedy little man, however, Mr Sterling, who had not said a word while James was speaking, suddenly interrupted:

"What was this man like, boy? Describe him. Tell us carefully. Did you notice if he had a triangular scar over his right eye? Was he of slight build

with untidy, long black hair? How did he get up there? On a motor bicycle, I suppose?"

The twins and Harriet shook their heads. The atmosphere in the room was suddenly tense. Peter moved over to her father's chair as he wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. David watched her, and James, after an anxious glance at Mr Sterling, watched Dickie.

"No, Mr Sterling," he said. "He wasn't like that. He was tubby and wore an old-fashioned tweedy suit with breeches and a stupid little round hat to match. Round his neck hung the biggest pair of binocs I've ever seen. They were real enough and I looked through them at a curlew and he knew all about birds-----"

"And he hadn't got a motor bike," Mary interrupted. "He'd got a blue Mini. It was waiting for him outside the cottage and we saw him drive off in it----"

"Yes, and we saw him drive back in it." Harriet got a word in. "It was Dickie who was clever and believed that when we were out of the way he might come back. And he did. Dickie made us hide in the heather and sure enough the stranger drove back, left the car for about ten minutes and nosed round the cottage, but we didn't go back there again."

"Maybe we ought to have gone back," Dickie said. "I don't really know why we didn't. Just tired maybe. I've also made a fearful, shattering boob, James. I'm very, very sorry, but I forgot to take the number of the Mini and I can't remember it, but we'd all three know the car again... I think now that the old birdwatcher might have been looking for something the helicopter dropped. But it wouldn't be birds' eggs, would it? And now there's something else we've got to tell Mr Sterling. You tell it, Peter."

So Peter told her father about the thief in the larder, of how they were sure nothing else had been taken except a little food and a glass of milk and that the twins, Harriet and Macbeth had searched the bedrooms and attic.

"This was brave of them, Dad. I wouldn't have been keen on my own, but Tom told Harriet that he saw a child in the lane, so we think it must have

been somebody who had got lost on the hill... Now, Dad, I must ask you again to tell us what really happened yesterday between you and that man on the motor bike who nearly ran me down in the lane. I know you're upset and worried, but none of us know why. It's no use keeping this secret any longer. You've admitted that you thought the twins' birdwatcher might be a man with a scar and that man is obviously the nasty chap who came here yesterday. You told me that you'd seen him before and now that we've got James here too, I beg you to tell us the truth. Please do. I can't bear to see you so worried."

Mr Sterling sat up straight and took his daughter's hand between his.

"Yes, my dear," he said firmly. "I must tell all of you now. I am sorry to have worried you but I had hoped that you would never know about my regrettable meeting with this man just four years ago. This is what happened."

The light was fading outside as Mr Sterling told his story without any elaboration. Peter sat close to him and David on the arm of her chair with one arm round her shoulder. The twins were on the sofa in the window with James, and Harriet sitting on a cushion on the floor leaned against his legs.

The name of the man with the scar was Henry Jones. One day when Peter was at boarding-school in Shrewsbury, Mr Sterling paid one of his rare visits to his employers in Birmingham. At that time he lived in a little cottage by a reservoir called Hatchholt, a mile or so from Witchend, at the head of a valley. He was in charge of the reservoir and lived there alone until Peter came home in the holidays.

On this particular afternoon he had left the offices of the Water Company and was walking down a narrow street on the way to the station when, round a corner, a man came running desperately towards him. He was pursued by several other men shouting, "Stop the thief! Stop that man!" The fugitive was clutching a bulging briefcase and instinctively Mr Sterling tried to stop him, was dealt a fearful blow and knocked half-unconscious into the gutter. Later he learned that the thief, who had just smashed a jeweller's window and scooped up a bag full of jewellery, was caught soon after. Mr Sterling was not seriously hurt but he was an important witness for

the police, and some days later did his duty by going back to Birmingham and picking out the man with the scar at an identification parade. Later still he had to attend the trial, and whilst giving evidence was abused and threatened by Jones from the dock.

"It was a most unpleasant experience for me, and I remember that I had a bad headache for several days after. He swore at me and said he would get me one day, but I'm glad to say that I succeeded in putting him out of my mind after a while. And you must understand, Petronella, my dear, that there was no need for me to tell you anything of this sordid matter. I was not seriously hurt, but after what Mr Wilson has told us I must now tell you all that the man who recognized me here yesterday - as I recognized him - was Henry Jones, and he was poking round this house which he wanted to buy. And now I must tell you something else. This afternoon when Mr Sparrow was showing me some treasures in *The Golden Lion* in Ludlow, which he is going to buy, I saw Jones again. He was staring at me through the glass of the shop door, and it may even be that he has been following me."

They were all much shaken by this story - not so much by what Mr Sterling said but by the effect that memory was having on him and of his obvious fear of the man with the scar. Peter was sure that his fear was not so much for himself as for her, and she was thankful when James broke the silence.

"I'm glad you've told us this, Mr Sterling, and I hope you won't mind if I say what I think. It seems likely, as Jones was nosing round here and actually told you that he wanted to buy this house, that he may be implicated in this jewellery business. As he was convicted and sent to prison we can make some inquiries. But if he really is up to something illegal - and we've no proof of this yet and mustn't jump to conclusions - then he's likely to be more scared of you than you need be of him. It was bad luck for him that you should be here, in charge of a house that interests him. He may have been horrified to see you in the shop this afternoon, but the fact that he was in Ludlow suggests that he may be using it as a centre. Honestly, I don't think you need fear that he'll come here again."

"That's all very well," David said, "but none of us likes the idea of Mr Sterling staying here alone until this business has sorted itself out. We can

manage by ourselves here, so why don't you go over to Seven Gates for a few days, Mr Sterling, and stay with Charles and Trudie?"

But Mr Sterling would have nothing to do with this.

"Certainly not, my boy. I'm not running away from Witchend and I'm obliged to Mr Wilson for his sensible point of view. I'm staying here and we'll talk it over again in the morning. Must admit that I feel better for telling you all about it, and you, Petronella, just stop fussing about your old father."

Peter thought this was a little cool and got up to switch on the lights.

"Let's go and look at the moon," she suggested, and then whistled the two dogs and led the way out into the dusk in front of the house. The bats were fluttering silently round the eaves, the brook sang in the culvert, and James was just asking Dickie whether he might be allowed to see their camp when they heard a melodious whistle from the lane.

"Nobody can whistle like Tom," Peter laughed. "He said he'd come round after supper."

Harriet opened the gate and ran to meet him.

"We've had the most fantastic excitements, Tom. We now know why Mr Sterling has been so upset and we can also tell you our adventure. I don't mean the thief in the larder but what happened last night."

"My, my!" Tom said as he tucked her hand into his arm. "What has my-favourite-girl-but-one been up to?"

Before she could answer they had reached the gate and Tom nodded to Wilson and then turned to Peter.

"Who was your visitor, Peter? Not this one. The other chap."

"Who do you mean, Tom? The child who broke into the larder?"

"Shouldn't think so. This bloke was too big to squeeze through a small window. I mean the character with the binoculars round his neck. Met him in the lane up there just getting into a blue Mini. Seemed surprised to see me and gave me a sickly sort of grin when I passed the time o' day. Then he said something about it being a nice evening for watching birds... Bonkers, I shouldn't wonder. It's a good evening right enough, but not many birds are around except the old owl who will be hunting soon... What's the matter with you, Richard? Over-eating again?"

Dickie glared at him and then pointed dramatically to James.

"You hear that, James? That's our birdwatcher. You know what we think of birdwatchers. He was spying on us. He's sinister. I know I'm right and we've got to dog him and trail him until you get your story."

"He may have been hiding in our secret place," Mary said. "We must go up there at once and see. He may have utterly destroyed it."

It was then that Harriet said what they were all thinking.

"But what is happening to us? Why do strangers keep coming here? Why do we have so many strangers at Witchend?"

6. Thursday-Friday: Friday's Dream

While Dickie was holding forth on birdwatchers in general and one in particular, Mr Sterling had come out of the house and heard the suggestion that yet another stranger had been watching Witchend.

Before any of the others could give their views on what Tom had told them, Mr Sterling went up to James: "Forgive me, Mr Wilson, if I interrupt, but I am sure you will understand that when Mr and Mrs Morton are not here I must take the responsibility for these young people. Except for Tom I have told all of you something which I would rather have kept to myself, but because of what he has just told you I must now say definitely that under no circumstances are the twins and Harriet to sleep in the camp until I give my authority for them to do so. There are beds for all in the house. I cannot understand why so many strangers should be interested in us here, but I must insist on this rule until some of these unhappy and unusual incidents have been resolved. I'm sorry if I seem to be an elderly spoil-sport, but I have made up my mind."

The twins looked at each other in dismay, and then Dickie asked if they might show James the camp before it was dark, and Peter and David said they would like to come too and perhaps go a little farther up the hill later.

"I'll look after them, Mr Sterling," James said. "I know it's an honour to be asked. Why don't you come with us?"

But Mr Sterling declined, and after David had fetched a big electric torch they closed the gate behind them and started up the hill with the two dogs.

"I may as well tell you now, James, that you've got to be blindfolded," Dickie warned. "You are not yet one of us and neither are you likely to be because you are over age. Will you please kneel down here so that we can tie this scarf over your eyes. Nobody who is not one of us, if you know what I mean, is allowed to know the way to we know where. And are you prepared to swear on oath never to tell anybody about our secret place? Do you swear?"

Without a flicker of a smile, James raised his face to the darkening sky and with uplifted right hand took the oath.

"I swear, Richard Morton, that your secret shall be my secret. Forever."

And with that James knelt on the grass and bowed his head as if he was about to lay it on the executioner's block.

"That was a very good oath," Mary said as she tied the scarf across his eyes with a very tight knot. "You must be brave, James, when I take your hand and lead you, but we'd like you to know that in spite of any temporary inconvenience we look upon you as our honoured guest."

"Thank you very much. Most kind of you, Mary. I know I shall be safe in your hands."

It was a rough, tough walk uphill for the temporarily blinded journalist, and the twins spared him nothing. For instance, a warning from Dickie who walked close behind him and prodded him in the back when he showed signs of flagging----- "Just keep well to the right here, James. The gorse is rather high and you may get a bit scratched, but whatever you do, keep well in... Watch him, Mary... Careful now. Steady, James. Maybe we should have warned you but there's a sort of precipice on your left - 'bout sixty feet deep and you can hear the stream at the bottom. Mackie fell down once and it taught him a lesson... Hope you don't mind heights, James?"

James hated heights and when they finally led him into the camp and took off the scarf they realized that he looked rather strained and pale. Tom, David and Peter had gone ahead with the two dogs who were snuffling round excitedly. Brock, being a hound, had a better nose than the elderly Macbeth, but he did not seem particularly alarmed.

James asked if he might sit down and made some complimentary remarks about the camp and then turned to Tom.

"That birdwatcher chap you saw in the lane? Could he have got down to his car without coming down to the house?"

Tom agreed that he could have done so by scrambling down through the bracken.

"Too dark now to see if he left a trail," he went on. "What do you think, David? I haven't been up here for months and it doesn't look as if anybody has disturbed it. Must say these kids leave the place tidy."

David swung the beam of the torch over the tents which were still as shipshape as when Dickie and he had left them this morning. There were no bits of food nor litter and no ashes, but when the beam picked out the place where they kept dry kindling and logs, he turned to his brother.

"Didn't we fix the old groundsheet over this, Dickie? I know I mentioned it and told you to keep it dry. I believe I fixed it myself and weighted the corners with stones. Surely you saw me do that?"

Dickie was not positive, although he remembered David telling him that Peter had supplied kindling enough for the first few fires. Somebody, or perhaps one of the dogs, had moved the waterproof covering, but there was no other sign that an outsider had been there.

After a little James got up.

"This mysterious cottage and the green signal light you were telling me about, Richard? Could we walk up the hill a little farther so that I can see it?"

"Let's walk up to my rock and then go back to the house," Peter suggested. "It won't take long and it would be interesting if the helicopter came over tonight. I don't want to leave my father alone for too long, but we might show James Beacon Cottage."

"Don't mind me," Tom said as he stifled a yawn. "I've been up since six this morning and can hardly keep awake. It's nice to see you all, but would somebody explain what Peter is talking about... Please. Before I fall asleep."

"Oh, Tom. We are sorry," Harriet said. "Walk behind the others with me and I'll tell you everything on the way to Peter's Rock. We'd forgotten that you weren't at Witchend while Dickie and James were explaining things. It's all very mysterious and exciting."

Tom listened to her patiently, and she knew that he was more surprised and interested in what might be happening at Beacon Cottage than in the manufacture of fake jewellery.

"It's a rum old place that, Harry. I don't often go up on the hill now. I haven't time, and when I do have a day off Jen and I do something together or I go over to Barton to see her. She reckons to come over tomorrow. Sent her love to all... But I don't like all this happening to Peter's father. Old man Sterling is difficult to understand, Harry. Some think he's an old stick-in-the-mud and there couldn't be two men more different than him and my Uncle Alf... Yet Alf thinks the world of Sterling although he's such a fussy old chap, always worrying about everything being shipshape. And now we hear he had the guts to tackle a thief on the run when he could easily have looked the other way... See what I mean? Often you never really get to know people, and now that the old chap has told us the truth we've got to look after him... Funny about that kid breaking in, though. Must have been hungry. Maybe we'd better have a careful look round our barns before we go to bed tonight... What do you think of this reporter chap, Harry? Bit smooth, isn't he?"

Harriet was thrilled by this sort of talk from one of her heroes. Tom was wonderful because he spoke to her as if she was as old as he was. But she liked James Wilson too and told him so.

"He'll help us, I'm sure, Tom. And I think he'll talk to Mr Sterling better than we can... Here's Peter's Rock and I'm wondering what we'll all do if we hear that helicopter again and see the light?"

They did not hear or see either. They all climbed up and showed James the direction of the cottage, but the moon was not yet high and no light showed. All was quiet too and even the twins were subdued, while Harriet was almost overcome by waves of sleep and could not stifle her yawns.

After a few minutes David got up.

"We can't stay here any longer, James. Peter doesn't want to leave her father for too long, but before we go down again will you tell us what you think we should do about all this? You know we'll help you if we can, but it's Mr Sterling we're worried about. Should the police be told? I don't think so, but we've got to consider everything. Do you think that man Jones is really likely to try and get his own back on Mr Sterling now that he knows where he lives?"

"He might," James acknowledged, "but if he's one of the men I'm after, he's not likely to worry about Mr Sterling except that he knows now that he's been recognized. What he doesn't know is that Mr Sterling is now aware of what he's probably up to, and it's better that he shouldn't know. I don't think Jones realizes that his activities are being watched."

"But James, my father has altered so much," Peter protested. "It isn't really fair to bring you into all this, but I'm frantic about him. He's changed, and although I'm sure that he's told us everything now, he can't forget the man and the way they were brought together. He *loathes* violence, James. He's so gentle that he just can't understand what's going on in this violent world. What can we do to help him? Do you think he should go to his brother at Hereford or his nephew Charles over at Seven Gates which is only a few miles away? I don't like leaving him too much although he's used to that, and I'm sure he'd be furious if some of us stayed around all day. He'd see through it."

Before James could answer, Tom spoke up.

"He could come and stay at Ingles. That's the solution. I'll tell my uncle all about it if I may, and he'll persuade him, Peter."

"Thank you, Tom. It is a good idea, isn't it, David? What do you think, James?"

"I'd like to sleep on it and then talk to him about it again. You can tell Mr Ingles if you like, Tom, but I'm sure that the fewer people who know about the Birmingham incident the better, and I don't believe your father is in real

danger, Peter. Let's go back now and I might have a chance to talk to him tonight. And I must say this. I agree that there should be no sleeping out of the house until we've cleared up some of these mysteries."

"You mean my birdwatcher?" Dickie asked.

"I mean all sorts of things, Richard. Perhaps the intrepid Lone Piners should concern themselves with something else these holidays - not too much sleuthing, I mean. And be sensible, all of you, but be sure that I won't hesitate to ask for your help when I need it."

And with this they had to be content. None of them had much to say when they climbed off the rock and started for home again. Even the twins realized that their friend James was abstracted and worried.

They turned for a last look at Beacon Cottage but there was no sign of life there. Only when they were halfway down the hill did they hear the distant throb of a motor cycle's engine. This seemed to come from the top but it was difficult to be sure, and they all knew that Peter was anxious to get back.

Mr Sterling was waiting for them at the gate and seemed more relaxed as he stooped to fuss Brock.

"I heard your voices as you came down through the wood," he said. "It's a beautiful night. Sometimes I wonder if we are not too remote here from the world... Come in, Mr Wilson. I shall be interested to hear more of your work. Time for Harriet and the twins to go to bed. Would you like to come in for a cup of something, Tom?"

Tom was uneasy, and when the others mentioned it later they all remembered that he had very little to say when they had left Peter's Rock.

"I'll say 'Goodnight', Mr Sterling, thanks all the same. I'm right sorry you're having all this bother. Do you mind if I tell my uncle about everything? Or does he know?"

"I was going to give him my confidence tomorrow, Tom, but tell him if you wish."

So Tom said "Cheerio all, and see you tomorrow maybe if you come up where the work is being done," and hurried off down the dark lane.

After a few broad hints from David and Peter, the twins, Harriet and Macbeth went up to bed. A camp-bed in Mary's room had been put up for Harriet, and Dickie followed the girls in and shut the door.

"They'll be O.K. down there for at least an hour," he said, "and unless that big brother of mine tries to haul me out of here, we've got time for a council of war... It's no use looking all exhausted and yawning, Harry. We know you've had a long day and want to get to bed, but you've got to stick it a bit longer. Please try."

"I'll try to keep awake, Dickie, but I don't see what we can do until the morning. What do you want to tell us?"

Dickie sat on the end of Mary's bed and tried to smother one of his own yawns.

"I want to ask you whether you're on my side in all this. Tom doesn't like what's going on, does he? I don't believe he wants to have anything to do with what we're trying to find out. And James? You heard him say we ought to 'concern ourselves with something else' in a stupid, pompous way, didn't you?"

"Yes, I heard that," Harriet agreed. "I don't know him like you do, but can't you see he's really worried. I think he didn't want to scare us, but I'm sure he's bothered about that man with the scar. I can stay awake about five minutes longer, Dickie, but I must say that I should be terrified if I met him, or if he came to the camp while we were there, or I opened the door of Witchend to him."

"You mean James believes this man is really dangerous?" Mary suggested as she lifted Macbeth on to his rug which she had spread over the bottom of

the eiderdown. "I just think he wants to keep us from what our mother would call 'nasty things' when she wasn't thinking what she was saying."

"But we can't stop doing *anything*," Dickie protested. "We can't just give up when we've already discovered the sinister birdwatcher. I didn't think James was interested enough in him, or maybe he's trying to put us off because he wants to follow him up by himself. We three know something funny is going on at Beacon Cottage, don't we?"

"Oh yes, and now he knows because we've told him. Give up now, Dickie, and go to bed. Harry has gone to sleep and I wish I had."

Dickie went reluctantly to the door. "O.K. then. You girls are hopeless. I must have a serious talk with James in the morning. Good night!"

Harriet had only the vaguest recollection of Mary helping her to undress and get into bed. She slept without moving until the dawn came up and then slipped into the strange world of dreams. And she knew, as she began to dream, that unless she could wake now and break the spell she was going to be frightened. She was in a wood. A wood so dark that it was impossible to distinguish between trees and shadows. She was running with heavy steps and slow strides through this ghostly wood, but from what or from whom she did not know. Then far, far ahead she saw a pin-point of yellow light which changed to green and the wood was filled with the thunderous noise of a throbbing engine. There was somebody or some place she had to reach, but the harder she struggled, the slower her feet dragged. She felt the perspiration wet on her face. Somewhere, not far away, she was sure that somebody wanted her. In her dream, above the monstrous throbbing with which the wood was filled, she heard a thin voice crying, "I can't see. I can't see!" and then suddenly there was a clearing in the shadowy wood and in front of her, in full sunshine, was their lonely pine tree. So this was what she had been struggling to reach? If only I can touch it, I shall be safe, she thought, although she still did not know what it was that she feared. She looked and saw that her feet were bare, and suddenly she longed to feel on her toes the cool dew with which the grass was covered. She made one supreme effort to escape from the wood, and as her feet touched the sunlit turf all was darkness again and the terror rushed back. At last she realized that she was winning the struggle to wake. Suddenly her eyes opened and

the sunlight of another day was pouring through the open window of Mary's bedroom in Witchend, and the only sound was the monotonous cooing of a wood pigeon and the faint music of the brook.

Her face was wet with tears as she sat up. In the other bed Mary was still asleep as she had been yesterday morning when they were both in the tent. And there was Macbeth too, but this time his eyes were fast shut.

As is the way with dreams, the memories of Harriet's nightmare began to fade. She lay blissfully on her back and remembered the lovely things of yesterday. She was happy in these thoughts of this beautiful world of new friends and new excitements which had been hers for only about forty-eight hours, and there were days and days of such delights ahead of her.

The horrors of the nightmare fled, and she knew she was going to give the twins a wonderful surprise. If she could get out of the room without waking Mary, she would go up to the camp to light the fire, and when this was going well she would run back to wake the twins and tell them that breakfast would be ready for them by the time they were dressed.

It was much easier to get out of bed, collect her clothes and slip out of the room than it had been to get out of the sleeping-bag and the tent. Not even Mackie woke.

She dressed in the kitchen and did her best to restrain Brock who greeted her rapturously. Begging the dog not to bark, she unbolted the back door and then wrote a hurried note which she left on the dresser----- "Gone out for walk with Brock, shan't be long - Harriet."

It was a morning as beautiful as yesterday's as she opened the gate and started up the hill under the trees. The dew was heavy, and when she looked back there was a film of mist above the stream.

Brock knew where he was going now and dashed ahead with his nose to the ground, his tail wagging with excitement. By the time Harriet had reached the hidden entrance to the camp he began to bark and she realized that he had gone straight in.

The bark was now certainly urgent and challenging and Harriet wondered what he had found. For a moment she was scared, and then realized that whatever was happening in the camp, she could not run back to the house now and admit that she was afraid to follow Brock.

So, with thumping heart she crawled down between the gorse and then stood up in astonishment. Outside Dickie's tent a strange boy of about her own age was struggling with the zip of a sleeping-bag and trying to catch Brock who was prancing round him and barking.

7. Friday: Villains at Work

Some two hours after Harriet's discovery of the boy in the Lone Pine camp, the man and woman known as Major and Mrs Graham were breakfasting in their room at the best hotel in Ludlow.

The man was wearing a patterned silk dressing-gown. His freshly shaven face was pink and smooth and his little grey moustache neatly clipped, but his eyes as he looked across the table to his wife were hard and cruel.

She looked, and was, in a very bad temper. When she went down later to face the world she would behave and speak as a different woman. But now she was also in a dressing-gown and her bleached hair was held in place with a net. Her face had not yet been worked on and she looked what she was - a sulky, greedy and dangerous woman.

"Now, Fred, just listen for once without starting an argument," she said as she lit a cigarette. "If we don't make a decision soon and make it together we'll be in trouble. Yesterday you wouldn't face up to facts, but now you must. Henry Jones is up to something, we don't know what. This radio shop is nonsense and a mistake too. He may do some work there himself, but the truth is he's not paying us a big enough price. We must get more out of him."

"How are we going to do that? You know the evidence he holds against us, and don't let's go into that again. Doesn't matter whose fault it is. I'm in favour of pulling off something really big between us and then getting out of the country. If we don't even try to fool him, but just work on our own I doubt if he'd go to the police. We know something about him too."

"But not enough, Fred. We don't know exactly why he cleared out of Brum, but I'd like to find out. I told him the other day, and I know I'm right, that this move out here is plain daft. We're both O.K. here for a bit on our own, but it's dangerous for us to be seen with him. We know that he moved out here as an experiment. He thinks it's safer but he can't be sure. It's not safer for us, and it's more expensive for us to sell what we buy from him. The big

towns where the fools have got money to spend on pay day and at Christmas-time are where we make the easy money. And in country towns on market days when the pubs are full. No, Fred, this Henry Jones-Sid Edwards type is dangerous. He'll ditch us when it suits him, he'll rob us when he can, and he's playing several of us off against each other... I want us through with him, Fred, and that means we've got to play it very cool."

The Major fanned away the smoke from his wife's cigarette.

"You mean we'd be better off if we cut free once and for all? Better to risk what he could do with that evidence?"

"Must I spell it out for you? If you weren't so chicken when it comes to a decision we could be clear in a week... Now listen. Friend Henry is busy settling down here, but he's not too sure of himself. He as good as told us that he's got at least one chap making the stuff for us to sell. Of course he didn't fall for your stupid suggestion that he tell us who it is. Actually it was such a fool thing to say that it only proves to him how stupid you are."

Graham got up and walked over to the window.

"It's always amused you to abuse me. Don't waste your breath now. You're going to suggest that we concentrate on finding the chap who makes this Victorian stuff and try to do a deal with him? It's an intelligent idea, Molly. Depends who it is, but if Henry has got him where he wants him, he'll be as pleased to get clear as we shall and then we could work together."

She stubbed out her cigarette and lit another.

"Brilliant, Fred. You've got it. When I go out presently - and I shall take the car today - I'll make inquiries about newcomers who have recently moved into a cottage. You can't keep many secrets from country people. We'll start that way, but in the meantime it would be a good idea to keep an eye on Henry."

"Marvellous, Molly! He's got a van and a motor bike and if he goes off I'm supposed to run after him. Brilliant! And wear a false beard while I'm at it, I suppose... I agree that if you don't pick up some clues today we must try to

follow him. Have to hire another car perhaps. He knows ours. And remember that he knows where we are, and it's even possible that he's having us watched. Look at the map before you go. Keep a record of some of your calls so that I report as promised... And Molly, you remember what he said about the foreign stuff? We must watch that too, because he's making a profit on selling to us. Wonder where he's getting it? He wouldn't be pleased if we found out, would he?"

She looked at him with more respect than usual and then retired to prepare herself for the day's work. This took an hour, and when she went downstairs Fred was sitting in the lounge reading *The Times*. He got to his feet politely and for the benefit of the other guests spoke in his Major's voice.

"Splendid, my dear. You've been quick. I'll come out to the car with you, and I do hope you have a very happy day with your old friends at the Manor. Are you sure you've everything you need?"

Ten minutes later the Major went out into Ludlow.

He had not yet had a proper opportunity of finding out anything definite about the new proprietor of *The Golden Lion*. Whatever finally happened to their relationship with Jones, Graham was sure there were possibilities of picking up something of real value in such a shop. It would also be interesting to see whether it was burglar-proof.

There were two people in the shop when he went in so he had a good opportunity of examining the furniture and silver on display. He was just as interested in listening to the conversation of the new proprietor.

Graham was at once aware that this man knew what he was talking about, and he was wandering towards what was probably an office at the back of the shop in the hope of seeing a safe, when the other closed the shop door after departing customers and came over with a welcoming smile.

"Good morning, sir. Don't let me disturb you if you would rather look round by yourself. I have some choice pieces here and much that is not actually on view. My name is Sparrow."

The Major dealt easily with this situation. After giving his name he gave an excellent impersonation of a retired Army officer who was hoping to settle with his wife in this area and looking for "a few quality pieces for his new home".

They had reached this stage when the telephone rang in the office and Mr Sparrow asked to be excused.

"This is *The Golden Lion*, Ludlow," the Major heard. "Yes, it is Sparrow here... Good morning, Sterling. I trust you travelled home in comfort yesterday. Good. Actually, no. Not very convenient. I am alone in the shop today and have a customer with me now... By all means, my dear fellow. Telephone me later at your convenience... Goodbye."

This did not tell the Major much except that Mr Sparrow would be alone here all day, but after the exchange of a few pleasantries, he broached the subject in which he was particularly interested.

"I've been wondering whether you have any Victoriana to show me, Mr Sparrow? My wife has a weakness for it. Can't say it's my taste but you know what women are. I must bring her in to meet you. She'll be fascinated by what you've got here, and no doubt I shall find myself spending more than I can afford. You know the sort of thing I mean? Fellow I know showed me one of those old mourning rings. Extraordinary object but quite valuable he said."

Mr Sparrow put down a silver mug he had been holding and did not even turn round when the shop door opened behind him.

"No, sir," he said. "I have no Victoriana. To be frank, I wouldn't buy any Victorian jewellery from any source. If you will permit me to advise you, I suggest that you examine with the greatest care anything like that which is offered to you. Be sure that it bears the official hall-mark. I must tell you, sir, that there's a lot of fake stuff about. I will have nothing to do with it."

While he was speaking, the man who had just entered the shop wandered round casually while the other two finished their conversation. Then the Major left, after promising to come back with his wife tomorrow or the next

day, and Mr Sparrow turned to welcome the newcomer. This man's clothes were as unusual as his own - a tweed jacket and hat to match and old-fashioned breeches. He was middle-aged, fresh complexioned and plump, and although he smiled amiably at Mr Sparrow, the latter noticed that his eyes were shrewd. And so, it soon proved, was his conversation.

He started by congratulating the new owner of *The Golden Lion* on the excellence of what was on display, and then startled him by saying that he could not help overhearing his views on Victorian jewellery.

"I'm interested in this subject myself," he went on pleasantly. "I've heard about this spurious stuff but I often wonder why a chap like your last customer should be interested in such things. Didn't look the type. I heard you say you wouldn't touch it, but you're the sort of professional who would spot a fake at once."

Mr Sparrow smiled, but the smile soon faded as his plump visitor lifted up the silver mug and without even examining the hall-mark dated it precisely. Mr Sparrow was suspicious. Perhaps his visitor was a dealer who had heard that the business was for sale? He certainly knew a great deal about jewellery and antiques and, after a little, eased an awkward situation by buying a silver candlestick after correctly stating its origin.

While Mr Sparrow was packing it reverently in a box, his customer said, "I'm afraid you may think some of my questions impertinent. Truth is, I am interested in old gold and silver but I am not in the trade. I know about the fakes, but if you do have any genuine Victoriana offered to you I'd like to know about it. My name is Robert Ruddy and I'm staying for a while at the *Shropshire Lad* in Craven Arms. And I hope you don't mind me asking but I'm sure I've seen your last customer - the military gentleman - before. Must have met him somewhere. Do you happen to know his name and where he's staying?"

Mr Sparrow regretted that he was not given an address but gave Mr Ruddy the names of the two best hotels in Ludlow.

"He spoke as if he was staying in the town, and I think he gave his rank and name as Major Graham. If he comes in tomorrow shall I give him your

name? I hope you'll pay me another visit anyway, and I'll remember your interest in genuine Victoriana."

"Don't bother to mention me to him, Mr Sparrow. I'll call at the two hotels now. I know I've met him somewhere, and as we're interested in the same subject, a talk might be entertaining. Good day to you and thank you. I'm delighted with the candlestick."

Mr Ruddy then strolled up the street into a public car park. Here he unlocked his blue Mini, put his parcel under the seat when he was sure he was unobserved and then locked the car again and continued his unhurried walk. He went to two more jewellers, made the same inquiry, and came out of each without buying anything. At least an hour had passed before he went into the *Swan*. He removed his tweed hat as he approached the woman at the Reception Desk and gave her a pleasant smile.

"Good morning. I do hope you can help me but I am looking for an old friend who told me that he was staying in Ludlow for a time but foolishly did not give me the name of the hotel. I am told - and indeed I can see for myself - that this is the best in the town and I think he would choose this. His name is Graham. Major Graham."

"Yes, sir. Major and Mrs Graham are here. Mrs Graham went out earlier for the day, and the Major went out into the car park a few minutes ago with two friends he met in the bar. You might just catch them."

Mr Ruddy smiled his thanks and approached the car park with caution. He was able to hide behind a large brewer's van, and what he saw gave him considerable satisfaction. A few yards away was a car in which Graham was sitting in the front seat next to the driver. Behind them a woman was looking over their shoulders at something the gallant Major brought from his pocket. After examination by both the strangers, the woman put the article in her handbag, while the man produced his wallet and passed over several notes to Graham. The latter then got out of the car and Ruddy heard him bidding the couple, whom he had undoubtedly swindled, a courteous "Good day".

The car then drove out of the yard and Mr Ruddy strolled out of cover and came face to face with Graham who was unable to conceal his surprise.

"Major Graham, I believe," Ruddy said, but without offering his hand. "I'm pleased to have found you so easily because I am anxious to have some private talk with you. We have an interest in common, Major."

Meanwhile Mrs Graham was on the hunt again. After studying the map, she drove north out of Ludlow to the small town of Craven Arms. Here she nearly lost her temper outside an hotel called *Shropshire Lad* when a bumbling idiot in a blue Mini stalled his car when driving out of the yard on to the main road. He nearly stalled again when he paused to raise a ridiculous little round tweed hat to thank her for waiting.

She drove up the lovely valley of the Clun to the little town of that name. At the post office she called to ask if there was an estate agent in the place as she was looking for a small property in the district. She was referred to the bigger town of Bishops Castle which she had already decided to visit, and a further discreet inquiry about newcomers to the district brought her no joy.

She was more fortunate at her next stop because here there was a branch office of an estate agent whose head office in Craven Arms she had overlooked. The young man here seemed glad to discuss the possibilities of a cottage property but had nothing to offer now. He did admit, however, that he had received several inquiries lately.

Mrs Graham then made a successful long shot.

"Now that reminds me. I wonder if one of your recent inquiries has been on my behalf? My husband has a distant relative in Birmingham - actually we haven't met for years - but I believe he did ask this man to keep a lookout for us because, come to think of it, he has recently moved to Ludlow. Would a Mr Edwards have been inquiring for a cottage property in this area?"

The young man flicked over the pages of a loose-leaf folder and looked up triumphantly. "Yes, indeed, Mrs Graham. Three weeks ago. I remember Mr Edwards now. Very striking gentleman. Very emphatic. I had to disappoint

him. You are quite right. He left a telephone number in Ludlow but not an address. Now that you have explained your interest, Mrs Graham, I presume you would prefer to be communicated with direct. If you will give me your address and will inform Mr Edwards that you have done so, that might save a lot of time and trouble."

Mrs Graham thought this an admirable idea. "Too kind," she gushed. "Most thoughtful of you. We are touring just now, so I will give you my London address, but of course I may telephone you at any time while we are in these parts. You have been so kind and helpful and I do thank you for your courtesy. So rare these days."

She wrote down an address in a fashionable part of London, which was really that of a newsagent who, for a small fee, was always ready to re-direct mail to clients who liked the use of a smart address. Then the young man opened the door for her and she went on her way.

The local hotel looked comfortable so she went there for an early lunch and afterwards drove north, leaving Bishops Castle with the great bulk of the Long Mynd several miles away on her right, and farther north still the smaller, but grimmer, shape of the Stiperstones. The map suggested that the country to the west of the latter was comparatively deserted, and with interest she had noticed that "old mine workings" were indicated. She decided to follow this road as far as Shrewsbury and to look out for any cottages which might once have been used by miners. If she had been Jones, these were the sort of places in which she would be interested. She also realized that she had not yet visited any farms. She liked these exploratory visits and had often been successful in spotting valuables which she had been able to buy very cheaply. She never stole on a visit, but twice she had been able to pass on information which had resulted in successful burglaries.

She was looking out for a village called Barton Beach which had been signposted for some miles, when she saw an even more intriguing finger pointing up a narrow lane-----

SEVEN GATES FARM

Private - No Through Road

Deciding that the farm was isolated and might well have considerable possibilities, she backed, turned in, and drove slowly up through a wood and then past another white gate that was fortunately open. That was two of them - five to go. The next led into a big farmyard with a group of cottages on the left and an enormous, gaunt red-brick house facing her. On the right was a barn with white doors, but where the other gates were she neither knew nor cared.

She drove into the farmyard, but somehow this place was not what she had expected. She had visited enough farms to recognize prosperity when she saw it, and although all the buildings here were in good condition and the yard was tidy, she guessed correctly that money made out of Seven Gates was earned the hard way. Behind the house loomed the great gaunt bulk of a mountain which she supposed was the Stiperstones, and altogether the whole atmosphere of the place was depressing. Even allowing for the fact that the group of buildings was isolated, she did not believe that her husband would consider it an attractive proposition for illegal entry. The farmhouse door opened and an attractive young woman walked towards the car.

Mrs Graham got out quickly and started her usual patter.

"Good afternoon. I'm so sorry to bother you but I'm afraid I've lost my way. I'm a visitor to this lovely part of the country, and as I'm always fascinated by old farmhouses I thought you wouldn't mind if I just drove up and-----"

"And what?" the woman said with the sort of smile that Mrs Graham was sure she did not mean. "What can I do for you? What did you want to know?"

"I'm so sorry if I've come blundering in here at an awkward time, my dear. It's just that I absolutely *adore* looking over old farmhouses with thrilling oak beams and all that sort of thing, and I wondered whether-----"

"I'm sorry. You've made a mistake. There are no oak beams in this house and I am much too busy to show strangers round Seven Gates. Perhaps you

didn't notice that the signpost at the first gate stated that the road to the farm is private? Turn to the right at the bottom for Barton Beach and Shrewsbury and to the left for Bishops Castle and Ludlow. Good afternoon."

Mrs Graham's artificial smile faded and she flushed with anger as she got into the car. It was not often she was snubbed by farmers' wives, and she was still in a bad temper when she drove into the scattered and unattractive village of Barton Beach. There was not much life here but it was, she thought, the sort of place in which Jones might like to settle an accomplice. The pub was closed, but she knew that she was more likely to hear gossip in the village shop than anywhere else. A bell jangled as she opened the door and saw a pretty red-headed girl of about seventeen behind the counter. She was talking to a middle-aged woman who half turned at the sound of the bell. But Mrs Graham stood where she was and listened with growing interest to what the girl was saying.

"I'm sorry, Mrs Smith. Really I am, but it's not my fault if the Shrewsbury bus has gone, and I'm sure my father wouldn't like you shouting at me. We've tried all we can here to help you since you came, but we can't do much about it if you don't like Barton. P'raps somebody in our village that you're so rude about would give you a lift into Shrewsbury?... Now I must attend to another customer... Good afternoon, Madam."

As Mrs Graham smiled her winning smile, the harassed-looking Mrs Smith flounced past her and slammed the door so hard that a card of ball-point pens fell off its hook above the counter.

"Oh, dear," the red-head sighed as she picked it up. "I do hope I wasn't too rude to her. I'm so sorry you heard me. Now, can I help you?"

This was the sort of situation Mrs Graham enjoyed and she handled it with more confidence and success than her last at Seven Gates. While choosing some local view postcards she soon discovered that the girl was only too pleased to share a friendly gossip. Her name was Jenny Harman. Her father had gone to Shrewsbury on business and her mother was visiting friends in Bishops Castle. Before long Jenny was helping her to choose cards and telling her about the views. There was one of a curious and rather sinister

outcrop of rock called the Devil's Chair on the top of the Stiperstones, and another of a depressing, rock-strewn valley called Greystone Dingle.

"I don't think I want a picture of *that*, my dear," Mrs Graham said as she passed it back. "You couldn't say you live in a very cheerful place, could you, Jenny, although you seem happy enough."

"Oh, I am, thank you. I've lived here all my life and I'm used to it."

"That poor woman who missed her bus doesn't seem to like it much. Has she lived here long?"

"Only a week or two. I'm sorry for her really, because she and her husband have taken a ghastly old cottage in the wood at the bottom of Greystone. Nobody knows why they came. Some of us think the cottage is haunted. It's a horrible place but I s'pose somebody like you would think that's silly... No. Nobody seems to know what Mr Smith does... *She* says he's ill, or getting better or something-----"

And so Mrs Graham's luck turned. Jenny chattered on happily as she turned the rack in which the postcards were displayed, and when Mrs Graham finally left she had gathered plenty of valuable information. Not only did she know the way to Greystone Cottage and who was living there, but as she drove slowly up the village street towards Shrewsbury she saw the distraught Mrs Smith trudging with her head down in the same direction. Perhaps it would be more important to offer her a lift than to go first to the cottage?

Greystone Cottage was as grim and lonely as Jenny's graphic description. It stood sadly in a gloomy hollow over-shadowed by pine trees and surrounded by a crumbling wall inside which a tangle of undergrowth rioted over the lower part of the stone walls. A track led to it from the rough road which ran down the dingle to the main road along which Mrs Graham had driven into Barton Beach.

It was not surprising that Mrs Smith was distraught and had quarrelled with her husband. That morning she had received a letter from their only son, Kevin. She recognized the handwriting at once, and with a start of fear tore

open the envelope. They had left the boy with her husband's brother before coming here and had not given him their address, promising that they would send for him when they had settled in.

The letter was brief.

Dear Mum - I cannot stick this place any longer, it is no use I can't. There is nothing to do and once he locked me in when I got talking to one of the drivers in the cafe. I can't stick it and when they was out I found a paper with the name of your new place on it. It said on the top "Charlie" so it must be where you are. I can't stay here and if you don't answer at once and send me enough money to come I shall go off on my own to find you or go with one of the drivers on a lorry to London or somewhere. I can't stick this no longer. And if I go I will make plenty of trouble.

Kevin.

Three weeks ago when Charlie Smith had told his wife that they had got to move from Birmingham because he was in danger of arrest by the police, he had admitted that he was really being blackmailed to do so by Henry Jones. She had begged him to give himself up rather than stay in this man's power, but Charlie had refused and eventually she stayed with him. Then came the decision that Kevin must be left behind for a few weeks, and because he must not know the reason for the flight from Birmingham he was not to know where his parents were going.

And so when she read this pathetic appeal for help and realized that it was post-marked five days ago, she decided to go to the boy at once. She went into her husband's converted workshop at the back of the cottage. At first Charlie did not seem to realize what she was talking about. As usual he was bent over his work-bench where a small crucible was being heated in a portable furnace. She knew that he was melting down gold or silver which presently would be adulterated with base metals. Later he would fashion his imitations of the Victorian jewellery which were so popular that his master Jones could sell all that he could make.

When his wife, in despair and anger, snatched the smouldering cigarette from his lips and forced him to listen to her, he stood up and, for a moment,

looked as if he would strike her.

It was sweltering in the workshop because the windows were shuttered, and Mrs Smith was actually struggling for breath as she tried to make him understand that they were both in danger if Kevin had already run away.

"And I've had enough of this place and of you, Charlie. I'm through. No woman could be expected to stay here. If you've any sense you'll pack up and clear out while there's still time. It was a crazy idea to come here, and I tell you now that Henry Jones will chuck you out when he's got all he wants from you. I'm through, Charlie, and I'm going to find Kevin."

"You're nuts," he said viciously. "If we can stay in hiding here for just another week and without the boy I'll have made enough for the three of us to take a chance and get clear. If you go now you can go for good. You and the kid too, if you can find him. Get out of my way and let me work. Who do you think I'm working for if it's not you two? If you find him, take him away somewhere else. We can't trust him here."

He did not know when she left the cottage, but when, after the passing of an hour or more, he turned off the methane gas and went into the kitchen, he found a plate of cold meat on the table. Nothing else. No message to say when or if she would be back.

He ate, drank and smoked almost without knowing what he was doing. He tried to persuade himself that he was better off without his wife and that she would never dare to give him away. She always exaggerated. Always had. Always fussed over the kid and said he was not getting a fair deal. Forget 'em both. That was the idea. Just work and make money and get out quick. There was quite a tidy bit tucked away - more than she knew. So get back to work...

He returned to the stifling workshop. The gas hissed again, the crucible glowed red and the skilled fingers fashioned beauty out of dross. Time passed unnoticed, but at last he was forced to open the wooden shutters and then the window to let in some fresh air. Suddenly he heard a dog bark, and as he looked up he knew that he was being watched.

He staggered to his feet, thrust the shutters right back and saw the pallid face of his son Kevin staring at him.

8. Friday: Kevin

Harriet and the boy struggling to get out of the sleeping-bag stared at each other in speechless astonishment. What she first noticed about him was that the lenses of his steel-rimmed glasses were so thick that she could not see his eyes properly. Next she saw that his thick, straight fair hair straggled across his forehead, and that while he watched her he was trying with one hand to grab Brock by the collar and with the other to pull down the zip of the sleeping-bag.

Obviously he had not slept in the tent, and except for a blue anorak which he had used as a pillow, he appeared to be fully dressed. His face was dirty.

As one part of her mind registered his appearance, another was playing strange tricks, and before she spoke she had that curious feeling that she had seen him before. She knew that she had found the thief who had broken into Witchend, but she was certain that the boy, still only half-awake, was frightened and only stole because he was hungry. It was possible that he would try to bluster or even threaten her, but she was sure that she could control the situation if he did. As she watched him she knew that he did not know what to say or do and she was sorry for him.

"Stop it, Brock," she said firmly as she walked across to them. "Stop that noise and don't be a silly little dog. He's not doing any harm."

Then she smiled at the boy.

"You look silly half in and half out of the bag. Just a sec and I'll unzip it and you can help me light the fire. Some of us are going to have breakfast up here. Are you hungry?"

She pulled the zip open. He was wearing a woollen pullover and jeans, both of which had seen better days. When he was out of the bag she saw that he was still wearing shoes which would not take him many more miles. Harriet was determined that he should speak first, so she patted Brock and then strolled over to where the kindling for the fire was kept.

When her back was turned he spoke.

"You from the place down there? I'm not doing any harm. I'm on my way now. No need for you to say anything. I was just going anyway."

"I asked if you were hungry. I bet you are and you can have breakfast with us if you like. What's your name and where do you come from?"

"I'm not answering no nosey questions and I'm not hungry. I've done no harm. I'm on a trek, see. One o' those charity walks. I've got sponsors and I must get cracking. I got lost and found this place."

"Stop being silly. Tell me your name. Mine's Harriet. I know you got into the house through the larder window and stole some food and milk and I know you were hiding near here just when it was getting dark last night. In fact, I'm sure that when we came back you were somewhere close. It's no use pretending. I'm not going to tell anybody except my two friends about you if you tell me the truth. You haven't done anything really wrong, have you? You don't look that sort. I think you're scared and maybe lost, and you were so hungry that because you couldn't get an answer when you knocked on the door you got into the house and borrowed the food. Where were you hiding when we came up here last night?"

While Harriet was speaking the boy fidgeted, and although she could not see his eyes properly through his thick glasses, she noticed his quick glance up towards the big pine tree and knew where he had hidden and why the dogs had been so uneasy.

"Well?" she went on. "Are you staying for breakfast? None of the grown-ups will come up here. Only my friends Dickie and Mary - the house belongs to their parents but they're not here yet. Are you going to be sensible and tell us the truth and let us help you? Where are you going? I know you're lost. Are you running away? Anyway, you must be hungry. Come on! Help me with the fire and tell me how you got here and where you want to go."

He nodded and gulped and Harriet knew she had won. During the next quarter of an hour, in a conversation which still remained one-sided, she

discovered that his name was Kevin Smith and that he did knock at the door of Witchend because he was lost, tired and hungry. He swore that he had done nothing wrong except get into the larder through the open window and that he would pay for everything he had borrowed when he found his mother.

"But where is she, Kevin? Not anywhere round here, is she? And haven't you got any money? Why are you wandering about in country you don't know?"

"Hadn't got much money. Spent it on buses and food yesterday. My dad made me go to a cafe kept by my uncle. I hate them both... Sometimes I can't see proper. I can't see without these glasses and they grin at me and say things... My mum's O.K. She has to do what he says. Dunno why. He don't say much. He works all the time when we're home - makes things in a shed at the back, but they said they're not going back there any more..."

His voice broke and Harriet tactfully did not look up from her task of laying the fire until he went to fetch more kindling.

She thanked him and then by clever and sympathetic questioning she got a clearer picture of the crises which had started Kevin on the run. She tried not to interrupt with questions. She knew that he was near breaking point and, more than once, was aware that there were tears behind the thick lenses of his glasses. And she could not always hide her own.

It seemed that his father and mother had a few rooms on the ground floor of an old family house on the outskirts of Birmingham. A few weeks ago they had told him that they were soon leaving their home and would never return. When Kevin asked why they had to go and where they were going, he was told that a move was essential for his father's work and that for a little while, until they were settled, he was going to live with his Uncle Joe at the cafe called the *Ace of Hearts* on the outskirts of Wolverhampton. Kevin had always hated his father's brother, and he was bitter because not even his mother would tell him their new address. It was this, Harriet realized, that upset him so badly. The boy's hatred of his father was as marked as his pathetic devotion to his mother who, it seemed, had now failed him. He did not tell Harriet much about the cafe except that they

made him spend hours washing-up and told him not to go out by himself. He was a virtual prisoner, and all that helped to make part of those hideous days tolerable was the brief friendliness of most of the lorry drivers who used the *Ace of Hearts*. There were several rows. Once he was locked in his bedroom for three hours, and on another occasion his uncle - and this was the most hateful and terrifying action - snatched his glasses from his face because he had refused to obey an unfair order, and then laughed at him because he blundered round the room asking for them back again.

About a week ago - and he seemed to have lost count of time - when his aunt had again refused to tell him where his parents were, he decided to run away with the help of a friendly driver called Stan who came in most mornings. Then he had his first stroke of luck. One afternoon, when his aunt was out and his uncle busy in the cafe, he searched a handbag which the former had left in the living-room. There he found a scrap of paper with four words written on it in his mother's handwriting.

"I put the paper back but I knew I'd got my mum's address, so I wrote her a letter and ran out when they weren't looking and posted it. I pinched a stamp too."

By now they were both sitting back on their heels on opposite sides of the camp-fire. Harriet did not dare to ask him for the address yet. She knew that she had half won his confidence and did not doubt that he was telling the truth. So all she said was, "Oh, Kevin. I am sorry. How awful for you. Nobody down there at Witchend will blame you for getting something to eat. If you'd been a little later the twins and I would have been there and we would have helped you. Please stay and have breakfast with us. P'raps we could help you find your mother?"

After a long pause. "You live up here regular then? You don't talk like it."

"Didn't I tell you? I live in London. I've been to Shropshire before but not to this place. My friends know all about the country. If you don't want anybody else to know, we won't tell them. Did your mum answer your letter?"

"I dunno whether she got it. That's why I run off. I told her I would in my letter. I said if she didn't send money for me to come I'd go off with one of the lorry chaps to London or some place... She didn't write. There wasn't a letter so I got to find her. What's your name? Sounded a bit daft to me."

"It's Harriet and it isn't daft and there's no need to be rude. My friends call me Harry and you can if you like. Now, before I tell the others I've got a surprise adventure for them, I want you to promise me faithfully that what you've told me is true and you haven't done anything wrong. Also you haven't said how you got here or told me your mother's address. When you promise, then I'll swear too that I'll only tell Richard and Mary and we'll help you find your mother."

Brock had now settled down between them, and as Kevin struggled to make up his mind he bent and stroked the dog's smooth head so that Harriet should not see the tears in his eyes. After a long pause he said,

"O.K., Harry. I swear I've done nothing wrong except pinch the stamp and get into the house and borrow the food and the milk. Stan helped me. I'll never forget Stan. Why couldn't I have a dad like Stan? I told him a bit and that I wanted to get to a place called Barton Beach to see my mum and he knew where it was. He gave me a lift into Shrewsbury and he gave me five bob. He says he used to live round these hills and tells me to get a bus to Onnybrook from Shrewsbury, and said there was ways of walking over the hills to this place Barton Beach but it would be better to get another bus..."

"But why didn't you, Kevin? Why did you come here? I know where Barton is. We've got a friend there. Dickie will know the way, but why did you start to walk without a map?"

"Didn't want no more buses," he muttered as Brock licked his hand. "They was all looking at me and asking where I was going and I felt a fool. Didn't know what to say..."

Harriet understood. She could imagine how miserable and frightened he would be, carrying no luggage and surrounded by curious strangers and then not liking to ask about other buses.

"Here are matches, Kevin. Light the fire and keep it going till I come back. I won't be long and you must promise to wait for me. Nobody will come, and as soon as I'm back you can help me cook the breakfast... What's the name of the house where your mother is?"

"It's a cottage. Greystone End Cottage was written on the paper. Be quick, Harry. I can't wait for ever. I got to get on. Leave the little dog. I like him."

Harriet flashed him a smile and ran down to the house. Now she really had a secret surprise adventure for her friends. They all knew Greystone, and in helping the pathetic Kevin they would possibly be helping James through Dickie who could find a story now. Surely Kevin's father who used to "make things" in a shed behind the house in Birmingham might be one of those craftsmen James had told them about last night?

The note she had written half an hour ago was still on the kitchen dresser so she threw it away. Nobody else was downstairs, but an unmusical humming from the bathroom suggested that Mr Sterling was on his way. As she quietly opened the door of Mary's room, Macbeth on the end of her bed cocked his head and growled. Harriet, too breathless to speak, went down on her knees and gently shook Mary until she woke and sat up.

Urgently she whispered her story.

"I've left him in the camp, Mary. He swore he wouldn't run away but I mustn't be long. He likes Brock so I left him there too. As soon as you can get Dickie out of David's room, tell him, and also tell Mr Sterling and the others that we're breakfasting in the camp. I don't think Dickie should tell James anything yet. Please ask him not to say a word. Kevin is lonely and frightened and we must take him to Greystone... And bring plenty of food up for breakfast and see that the others don't come with you. Please hurry, Mary, because I'm scared that Kevin might run off if I'm not back soon. You do understand how secret and exciting this is, don't you?"

Mary was out of bed before she had finished speaking. All she said was,

"Super, Harry. You're great. We'll fix everything. I'll wake Dickie now. Get back to the camp and we'll be with you soon as we can... Hurry, but take

two bottles of milk with you. We can't carry everything."

Harriet was out of the house before Mr Sterling appeared. She would have hated to deceive him and was glad not to have to answer awkward questions. As she toiled up the hill again she could smell wood-smoke and knew that Kevin was keeping the fire going. Then she heard Brock, and when she crawled into the camp the dog was rolling on the grass and playing with the boy. A kettle was steaming on the fire.

"Everything's O.K." Harriet puffed as she sat down. "It's all fixed, Kevin. The other two will be here soon and they've sworn not to tell anybody else. Soon as we've eaten - thanks for putting the kettle on - we'll take you to Greystone over the hill."

While they were sipping tea she told him something about the twins and admitted that she too was an only child and not always as happy at home as she was with her friends here - or even with her grandfather who gave her much that her parents had not time to share with her. She asked no more questions and in the half-hour they spent together before the twins arrived with Macbeth, he seemed to forget some of his fears and actually laughed once when playing with Brock.

Then Harriet heard the peewit's whistle from the wood below.

"They're coming now, Kevin. Remember that all three of us want to be your friends. I've told them all you've told me and if you want us to take you to Greystone we'll do it. Don't take too much notice of the twins if they show off a bit because they don't really mean it. I believe you've told me the truth and I've told them so... This is the twins' dog called Macbeth who goes everywhere with them... Hello, Mackie. Come and meet a new friend."

Macbeth sniffed cautiously at Kevin's outstretched hand and then greeted his other friend Brock. While Kevin was watching the two dogs, Dickie and Mary, both heavily laden, came into the camp.

Dickie spoke first.

"Hello, Kevin. Harry told us about you so not to worry about explaining again. We'll take you to Greystone after breakfast. We know that cottage. Is that what you want?"

Kevin nodded. Then, "Thanks," he said for the first time for about ten days. "That's O.K. Thanks a lot."

Then it was Mary's turn.

"Hello, Kevin. Harry says you've been looking after the fire. Let's fry the bacon."

He nodded again and licked his lips because his mouth was watering. There was not much to say after that because they did most of the talking. He could not have put it into words but before long he realized that he was accepted. They never mentioned the larder window or the *Ace of Hearts*, or the fact that he was filthy and unwashed and ravenously hungry. Dickie, after a glance at the unzipped sleeping-bag, did not even refer to that, but after ten minutes of steady eating and drinking he uttered a word of warning.

"We've got an elder brother and his girl-friend who lives here," he said suddenly. "If we hear them coming up this way you'll have to hide up the tree as you did last night. So if we say when, don't argue. We'll help you up and you must climb high enough to be properly hidden. We don't want them asking awkward questions, do we, pard?"

"Pard" nodded understandingly. "Will do," he agreed, and soon after he had to do that very thing as Peter and David came up to see how they were getting on.

When Dickie had helped him into the tree, Harriet, with great presence of mind, disposed of their guest's used plate and mug in the pail which they used for washing-up in the stream.

"Enjoyed your breakfast, chaps?" David inquired after a good look round but fortunately not up. "Looks as if you've been having a healthy meal. No signs of strangers up here, I hope."

"Everything was very neat and tidy when we arrived," said Mary truthfully. "What are you two going to do today? Are you going to ask us to come with you? Silly old joke. Ha! Ha!... Sorry, Peter. Wasn't really funny, was it? We were just saying that we'd like to take Harry over the hill to Barton today and look up Jenny and her parents. We'll take a packed lunch and we'll be down presently to see to it. If you and David are going off on your own, will you take Brock because we must have Mackie who is longing to see Jenny because she is another of his special loved ones."

"And about my fellow-journalist, James?" Dickie asked. "Has he roused himself yet? I must explain that I think he'll have to do without me today. Have you had breakfast? There's not enough here to go round two more."

David sat down on the grass.

"I've got a hunch about you twins this morning," he said. "And that goes for Harriet too. Something seems to tell me you've got a plot brewing. You're just too innocent, and there must be some reason for Mary coming into my room so early to wake Dickie. Remember not to get involved with strangers on your wanderings and keep together, won't you?"

For a moment Mary wished that they could tell them about Kevin. She knew they would have to know sometime, and she knew David was serious in telling them to be careful about strangers. Meanwhile Harriet was worried that Kevin, up in the tree, might overhear the others say something about the fake jewellery plot which might upset him. Possibly he did not know exactly what his father was doing, and if that was so she did not want them to be responsible for telling him. She was deeply touched by his affection for his mother and was sure they would have done something worthwhile to help him if they led him to her. Dickie, as so often happened, seemed to guess what his twin was thinking, and with considerable presence of mind said,

"We'll be careful, brother. Honestly we will. Mary and me will come down with you now and get some provisions for our trek, and I'd like a word with James. Do you mind clearing up here, Harry? Wait for us here or at Peter's Rock if you get bored, but we won't be long."

Harriet got the message. The twins were determined to get the others out of the way as quickly as possible and were suggesting that she should get Kevin up to Peter's Rock where there were plenty of hiding places.

"Of course I don't mind, twins. Be as quick as you can, and in spite of this super breakfast remember to bring plenty to eat... Goodbye, Peter. Have a lovely day and give my love to your father. And you'd better take Brock, although he likes me now."

As soon as the others were out of sight she called to Kevin to come down.

"Soon as we've cleared up we're going on ahead, Kevin," she said. "I promised that nobody else should know about you, and although David and Peter are my friends too, you see that we kept our word to you. Better not speak too loudly now because I'm supposed to be by myself. And cheer up. You've had a good breakfast, your secret is safe with us and we're going to take you to Greystone."

He did what he could to help her but did not say much, and as soon as the camp was tidy she led him up the hill and helped him to climb to the top of the rock.

"We can see anybody coming from any direction from here," she explained. "Lie down flat in the sun and rest. It's a long walk... You O.K., Kevin? You look a bit miserable. Not sick or anything?"

He shook his head.

"Course not. I just want to get cracking. What about that little dog? The first one. Brock you called him. Is he coming too?"

"Don't expect so. They'll bring Mackie. He goes everywhere with us. He belongs to the twins... Shut your eyes. I'll wake you when they come."

He did as he was told, and she too lay flat on the rock. The sun beat down upon them and shone pink through the lids of her closed eyes, and when she opened them again Kevin was asleep with one grubby arm outstretched above his head.

Fifteen minutes later she saw the twins toiling up the hill and stood up and waved. She noticed that Dickie was carrying her rucksack as well as his own, and as he approached he made the best of the situation by staggering and tottering up the track, bowed down under the weight of his double burden.

"Water!" he gasped when he was close enough to be heard. "Water, comrades. One hundred and ninety-nine leagues through forests and across desert wastes have I toiled with the burden of a faithless woman. Give me water lest I perish."

"Don't bother, Dickie," she called. "Kevin's asleep. He's not even watching you."

So Dickie gave up and Harriet helped the twins and Macbeth to climb up beside them. Kevin's rest seemed to have done him good, and by the time he was ready to go on, Dickie was actually getting a response from him, as he chattered away about school and sport and what it was like living in London. He was clever enough not to ask Kevin anything about himself.

Kevin's shoes were in bad condition and they soon realized that it was difficult for him to keep up with them. The higher up the valley they climbed the hotter it became, and when they reached a pool Kevin said he wanted a drink. Although too polite to say so, Harriet was sure he needed a wash and was relieved when Dickie told the girls to walk on towards Beacon Cottage while Kevin and he had a bathe. When they were alone Harriet told Mary that she was anxious because they had not told the others about Kevin.

"Not to worry, Harry. Soon as we've got Kevin safe we'll go and find Jenny. We can telephone Tom or somebody to fetch us, or get on a bus and go straight back to Witchend and tell all. They think we're on to something, and Dickie told James that he'd have a story for him tonight. I know what you feel, but we must do this for Dickie and you want to help Kevin. I mean you're very, very sad and sorry about him, aren't you?"

Harriet admitted that she was but did not add that she was beginning to feel involved with him in a most peculiar way. It seemed as if she had known

him for a long time instead of a few hours.

When the boys joined them Kevin certainly looked cleaner - and seemed more cheerful. Dickie insisted on showing him Beacon Cottage and told him about the mysterious birdwatcher and that they believed somebody had been using the place. But none of them mentioned the helicopter.

Then Dickie led them down the other side of the Mynd. It was a long walk across rough country, and when they reached the southern end of the Stiperstones they rested for more than an hour and enjoyed their sandwiches and fruit. Kevin was very tired and peevish and asked why they could not have got a bus and did they not know anybody who had a car? Then, as it so often did in this hilly country, the weather changed for the worse and they heard thunder muttering over the Welsh mountains in the west. Soon after they had started off again, the rain swept over the hills and down the grim Greystone Dingle like grey smoke. They sheltered under a hawthorn tree for a few minutes until the sun came out again and soon the wet rocks on each side of the track were steaming. Then the wood closed round them and the only sound, besides the squelching of their shoes, was the heavy plop of rainwater as it fell from the trees.

The twins trudged a few paces ahead with Macbeth who was beginning, as Dickie remarked, to walk like an old man. Then he turned and said to Kevin, "Shan't be long now, mate. We've been here before. Do you want to be the first to see the cottage?"

"No, he doesn't. You two go ahead and spy out the land," Harriet said.

"S'pose my dad turns me out," Kevin said after a long silence. "What will I do? Where'll I go if my mum isn't there? Maybe she never had my letter?"

"He can't turn you out, Kevin." Harriet tried to comfort him. "We're with you, and anyway our friend Jenny is at Barton Beach which is only about a mile away. She'll help us to get back to Witchend where Peter's father and James Wilson will do anything when we tell them what's happened. You mustn't be afraid of us, Kevin. I don't think your mother will let you down. Probably she didn't get your letter until today, and she'll be thrilled to see you when she knows how unhappy you've been."

Kevin did not seem particularly impressed by this reasoning, but he gave Harriet a grateful glance, and in silence they trudged the next hundred yards to where the twins were now waiting for them at the edge of a clearing.

"That's Greystone End," Mary announced. "We can't see anybody and all the wooden shutters are over the windows. I've put Mackie on the lead but if you like we'll let him go and explore first. He's growling in a sort of unfriendly way. P'raps your mum and dad have gone out shopping or something?"

Kevin, now footsore and exhausted, looked utterly miserable. He could not believe that this horrible, lonely and deserted cottage could be his new home. For the last three hours he had been hating the country and longing for the streets that he knew. This was the end.

But it was not. It was the beginning of a changed life for him. Macbeth suddenly barked a warning and Harriet said,

"Look, Kevin, the shutter of that window on the ground floor is not quite closed. Let's go and look through the window. I'll come with you."

"No!" he said suddenly and firmly. "I'll go first, but don't go away."

To their surprise he jammed his hands in his pockets and walked across the clearing, clambered across a gap in the broken wall round what once had been a garden, and pushed through the rioting weeds that years ago had taken control. He was mildly surprised that he seemed to have found some courage and was helped by the knowledge that his new friends were just behind him. He heard Macbeth bark again and then, before he could change his mind, he grasped the stone window ledge, pushed back the wooden shutter a little and looked through the glass.

The room was dark and lit by one small, gas-burning lamp illuminating a bench behind which a man was seated. The man was his father, and Kevin knew that the blow-lamp he was working with his foot was fired by gas from a large cylinder standing on the floor beside him. He was fashioning some small object with tools Kevin had seen before, and through the

window which was open a few inches he could hear the hissing of the gas and see the perspiration pouring down his father's face.

Suddenly Macbeth barked again and Charlie Smith looked up and saw Kevin's pale face only a few feet away. And as the boy stared he saw his father's face change. No welcoming smile here. Only fury.

Suddenly Kevin knew that it was a mistake to have come here and he turned to the others.

"Run for it," he whispered hoarsely. "It's my father and he's mad with me. Go on. Run now."

He saw the twins glance at each other and then at Harriet as she stepped forward and put her hand on his arm. Then the window was opened and Charlie Smith pushed back the shutters and looked them over in silence.

Kevin could see his cunning mind working, and was still wondering whether they should all run for it when he remembered his mother. Perhaps she had not heard them? Or perhaps she was out? If she was in the cottage he could not go until he had seen her.

He gave Harriet a sudden smile. Then, "Hello, Dad," he said. "I've come to see Mum. These friends of mine showed me the way. Did she get my note?"

"Yes, son. She got it. We was thinking you might be along. She'll be glad to see you. Truth is she's not too well today. Got one of her bad heads and is having a lie down upstairs, but she'll be glad you've come. Come along in and bring your pals... Come round the front and surprise her, but keep that dog quiet. I'll open the door soon as I've told your mum you're here... Go round the front."

Kevin watched him turn off the gas and then go to the door of the improvised workroom. Maybe it was going to be all right now and that his threat to run away had scared them? He did not stop to reason and for a little forgot the look on his father's face when he had recognized him just now. So in relief he turned to his friends. "Come on in then, all of you. Come and meet my mum and have a drink or something."

Mary was trying to quieten Mackie, Dickie looked bewildered, and Harriet worried. Something was nagging at her memory and she was frightened. Surely she had seen this wood before? A dark wood in which it was difficult to distinguish the shadows from the trees? A voice crying "I can't see!"

"Come on, Harry. Come and meet my mum," Kevin was saying, and when she looked up she saw the boy's father coming round the corner of the house and there was nothing she liked about his appearance. But it was too late now to do anything about it. Mary had still got the snarling Macbeth on a lead and Kevin had run ahead to join the twins, so Harriet followed them reluctantly round the corner of the house.

"Nice little dog that," the man was saying - but not as if he meant it - as he held open the door to the cottage. "On your right, son. That's our new living-room. Didn't really want you to see it until we got some better furniture, but take your pals in there and your mother will be down in a minute."

It was easy enough. The room was dark because the shutters were fixed across the windows, and Macbeth was still barking defiance as Charlie Smith slammed the door after them - and locked it from the outside.

For a few minutes they shouted until they were hoarse. Kevin, in a frenzy of rage, beat on the panels of the door, first with his fists and then with a chair. And when he dropped this with an exhausted sob, Dickie grabbed it and with Mary's help smashed the glass of the window, although the shutters were also barred in some way from the outside.

Eventually Harriet quietened them and went to Kevin who, still sobbing, was leaning with his head against the door.

"Stop it, Kevin. It's not your fault. We don't blame you. He fooled us all, didn't he? Come over here, Dickie, and explain to him, and Mary, you must keep Mackie quiet. Let's listen and try to hear what's happening."

This made sense and eventually Kevin was calmed sufficiently to take part in a whispered discussion. He told them that he was now sure that his

mother was not in the house and that his father was furious because his new workshop had been discovered. He did not elaborate on this and the others had sufficient sense not to question him about it. Whether or not Kevin really knew what his father was doing they were never sure. After a while they heard footsteps in the room overhead and something heavy being dragged across the floor.

"Maybe he's packing up and going," Kevin whispered. "He would, you know. He'd run off and leave us to starve. You're in it now because you know me. I don't care what you say. You've been decent to me and I've got you into this..."

"Shut up, Kevin," Dickie said. "We've been in this sort of mess before and we always get out. Good riddance if he does go. James, or David and Peter will find us. Of course you're browned off, and so are we, but if we just keep quiet your dad may get a bit fussed and nervous and open the door because he thinks we're all dead or something. Then we'll set about him, and that includes Mackie. So don't anybody answer him if he does call out."

While her twin was whispering, Mary was under the window trying to sweep the fragments of broken glass under the sofa with a rolled-up newspaper. She was just explaining that she did not want Macbeth to cut his feet when they all heard the sound of an approaching car. They crowded to the shuttered window, heard the engine stop and the door slam.

"Now!" Dickie whispered. "All shout for help."

They yelled and stamped and beat on the closed shutters. They heard racing footsteps on the stairs and a bang on the cottage door.

Dickie quietened them again so that they could hear the murmur of men's voices.

"Whoever it was must have heard us," Harriet whispered. "Why doesn't somebody come?"

Before any of them could answer that question, they heard the key turning in the lock. Suddenly the door of their prison was flung back and as they

moved forward and Macbeth barked again, they saw a slightly built man of middle height with a high forehead and long, untidy black hair. He was wearing an open-neck shirt and a dark leather jacket. And as he moved his head into the light they saw on his forehead a white, triangular scar.

9. Friday: David and Peter

When David and Peter got back to the house after their early morning visit to the Lone Pine camp, they found Mr Sterling and James already at breakfast. The twins, who had come down with them, retired to the kitchen and packed up provisions for their expedition, taking care not to emphasize the extra they were taking for Kevin.

Before they left with Macbeth they stacked the three rucksacks in the porch and went to bid the others farewell.

"Not to worry about us," Dickie beamed. "We hope you'll have a nice day. We're taking Harry over the top and then maybe we'll sit in the old Devil's Chair again. We don't know whether Jenny is coming to Ingles today but we might look her up in Barton-----"

"And we might take Harry to see Charles and Trudie at Seven Gates," Mary added. "Harry knows them, but we think we ought to do this expedition while it's sunny and fine, don't we, Dickie?"

"That's the way of it. Can you do without me today, James? I might have a story for you tonight. I'm looking for one all the time and I'm really on to something now."

"Mind where you look, Richard," James replied seriously. "And don't spend too much time up at that cottage on the top. Just be careful. Anyway, Mr Sterling has kindly asked me to stay here tonight, so I'll see you later. Take care of him, Mary. I want my story."

When they had gone, David said, "I warned them too, James. They're usually sensible but I believe they know something we don't. Peter thinks so too, but they're used to going off on their own and it's reasonable enough for them to show Harriet round. She's got a sensible head on her shoulders anyway. What would you like to do today and have you got anything special to tell us? How long are you going to be here?"

"I'd like to take the car and might drive round the Mynd and the Stiperstones and possibly as far north as Shrewsbury. I want to explore the country myself and get the hang of it. Unless I can pick up some definite news today about possible workshops for the making of this trash, I must go back to Birmingham and possibly London tomorrow. I'll be glad of your company, David, if you and Peter would like to come with me now. And Mr Sterling too if he wouldn't be bored! He knows the country better than any of us."

"I'm obliged to you, Mr Wilson," Mr Sterling said, "but I don't think I'll accept your offer. I will walk over to Seven Gates to see Charles and Trudie and shall take my new dog with me. I will ask them whether they have seen any strangers - and that reminds me to remind you, Mr Wilson, that Jones is really stupid if he thinks he can hide himself or any of his accomplices for long in the country. Suppose he had taken Witchend? It wouldn't have been more than a day or two before our friends the Ingles would have called, and whether or not Jones had talked, they would soon have known what he was hoping to hide. Petronella knows what I mean. There aren't many secrets in the country... Now as we're all going out today we'll lock up carefully and hide the key in the usual place... What about you two? Are you going with Mr Wilson?"

Peter got up and started to clear the table.

"I think Dad is right. You go to Seven Gates and forget that horrible man. We know he threatened you, but he probably wants to keep out of your way, and it's obvious that he had nothing to do with our burglary yesterday. David and I planned to have a day on our own, so if you will give us a lift into Ludlow, James, that would be a help. We may go over to Seven Gates or to Barton later."

James was puzzled about Mr Sterling. He was less anxious and nervy than yesterday, and there was much in his reasoning that there was no necessity for Jones to return to Witchend. But why did he suddenly want to go off on his own? Was there something that he wanted to satisfy himself about? He glanced at Peter, but she was looking at David, so he tried again.

"When you were telling us yesterday about Jones you said that you had seen him outside Mr Sparrow's shop. Do you mind me asking whether you have told your friend about your previous encounters with Jones and warned him about a man who you know was once a thief?"

"Certainly not," Mr Sterling said sharply. "There was no need to bother him with my troubles. He has his own problems."

"I know Jones may have been going into the shop, but when he saw you there he wanted to avoid doing so because you know about his past. I think Mr Sparrow should be warned. May I tell him? I'm going to Ludlow with these young people in any case, and I'd like to find out what Jones is up to. You've seen him in the town, and although he may have been passing through, it's possible that he's staying there. He may have been to see Mr Sparrow again, and if so we'd like to know why. If his scar is very noticeable, Mr Sparrow might remember him. He might even have left a name and address... I'm not trying to intrude in your affairs, sir, but you know why I'm here, and if Jones is as dangerous as I think he may be, I'm sure Mr Sparrow should be warned. Would you mind telephoning him now?"

David and Peter, who had been in the kitchen, came back into the room in time to hear most of what James was saying. They realized that Mr Sterling was reluctant to telephone, but when Peter offered to ring for him he went out into the hall and closed the door. James looked at them with a rueful grin.

"Sorry, Peter, but Mr Sparrow should be told."

"My father hates the telephone and we can go and see Mr Sparrow ourselves later," Peter said shortly. "All the same, I see what you mean, James."

They could hear the murmur of Mr Sterling's voice, but his conversation was very short, and when he came back there was a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"Just as I thought. It is most inconvenient for my friend to speak. He is single-handed in the shop today and has a customer now which makes it impossible for him to conduct a private conversation," and after that none of the others thought it wise to raise the subject again.

After a little more pottering, Mr Sterling set off in his old walking boots with Brock.

"The dog will get tired before you do, Dad," Peter said as she went to the gate with him and gave him a packet of sandwiches. "Take care of him and give my love to Trudie, and tell her we may be over today and then we could come back with you. You're not so worried about that man now, are you? And don't be cross with James because we all like him so much. We'll go and see Mr Sparrow, but if there's anybody in the shop we won't disturb him. Sure you don't mind going off on your own?"

He smiled at her affectionately. "No, my dear. I'm used to my own company. Have a good day with David, and I trust you not to worry Mr Sparrow too much with our affairs."

She watched him take the track up through the wood and stood at the gate until he turned and raised his hand. This was an old and familiar gesture which was associated with every parting from her childhood at Hatchholt until now. It had always been like this, and she supposed as she walked back to the house that she would never say "goodbye" to him without a feeling of loss.

In the house David and James were arguing over the washing-up and paying little attention to what they were supposed to be doing.

"See here, Peter," James said as he flung down a drying-up cloth. "I feel I'm messing up your holiday. Are you sure you two wouldn't rather go off on your own? I know your father has been upset, but I did mean what I said just now about Jones. We know that this fake jewellery is still being made in large quantities and pushed all over the country. I want to expose this, but the fact that Jones has been in prison doesn't mean that he's a criminal now. I'd like you to take me to Mr Sparrow and then go off on your own. You might even allow me to buy the two of you a lunch if there's time. David

was just saying that none of us really knows what Jones looks like. Your father's description, Peter, except for the scar, was vague. When he met you in the lane on his bike, he had goggles and a helmet on so you don't know. But if I could see a picture of him it would assist me in my inquiries, as the police say."

"We don't mind helping you, James," she replied, "but *please* don't ask us to do any more detective work after today. It's a miserable start to the holidays for all of us, and I'm going to do everything I can to make my father forget what's happened. I'm not going to ask him any questions about what happened years ago, but I don't think I'll ever be satisfied until I know everything that happened. You understand that, don't you, David?"

"I think so. Yes, I'm sure I do. James was suggesting that he takes us first into Shrewsbury to examine the files of the local paper at the time of the trial and look at the photographs. If we're going to help him we may as well know the full story as well. I was saying that I didn't want you to go through all that, but if you don't mind let's get it over. After we've taken James to Mr Sparrow we'll go off on our own as we planned."

Peter nodded. "Yes, we'll do that, James. You two go off now and get ready. See that every window is fastened and that the key is under the brick where the twins can find it if they're back first. I don't know what you two were supposed to be doing, but it wasn't washing-up the breakfast things."

Ten minutes later they were talking to Mrs Ingles who told them that her husband and Tom were in the fields and that Jenny had just telephoned to say that she would not come over today because her father was going to Shrewsbury on business and she must help in the shop.

Peter told her where the others had gone and asked her if she would mind walking down to Witchend later in the day to see if all was well. Mrs Ingles promised to do this and added, "Ask your father to come round and have a chat with us as soon as he feels like it. We're sorry about all this trouble but we'll keep our eyes open."

The sun was hot and the sky was blue, so James opened up the roof of the car and told David and Peter to sit together in the back seat. As soon as he

was on the main road he drove fast so that the wind stung tears from their eyes and Peter's hair streamed from her head like a golden shower.

On their left the smooth flanks of the Mynd dwarfed the little fields and woods of Stretton Vale. On the other side of the road proud Caradoc was in shadow and soon gave way to the whaleback ridge of the Lawley as they tore north.

As they drove over the Severn into Shrewsbury, Peter told him where to park, and when they were inside the newspaper office's reception room James asked for the files of the paper reporting the crime and then the trial. Suddenly Peter changed her mind.

"I'm sorry, David, but I'm not sure I want to read what happened after all. I know I said I wouldn't be satisfied until I knew the whole story, but suddenly it seems wrong to go through it all now when my father wants to forget it. Do you understand? I shall go and sit in the car until you and James have finished raking up the past... Oh dear, here's James. I wonder if he'll understand?"

When James had put down on the table two enormous bound volumes of back issues of the newspaper, David told him what Peter had said. He understood at once.

"I know how you feel. Off you go, but don't get talking to any strange men. Give us half an hour. David will tell you everything you want to know."

So Peter went out into the sunshine and at once missed the two men. It was not altogether surprising that she spent the next thirty minutes choosing a tie for David. Eventually she bought him one with an enormous floral pattern on a pink background. She was not sure whether he would approve but was certain it would be good for him. He was conservative in his habits and his dress.

They were waiting for her when she got back to the car.

"Satisfactory as far as it went," James said as he opened the door for her. "Just as well perhaps that you didn't read it all except that it would have

warmed your heart to know how brave and straightforward your father was. At his request the paper didn't actually print your father's name and so he was called 'an important witness' - that is how he was able to keep this whole matter a secret until now. Jones was a very nasty man, but the photographs don't tell me much. We could see the scar. I wonder he doesn't have plastic surgery, but we must remember that we have no evidence that he is doing anything illegal now... Peter, my dear, I have been wondering about the twins' birdwatcher. Who is he? His dress is more eccentric than his behaviour. True, Tom told us that he was watching Witchend, but most criminals prefer to be inconspicuous."

"Unless the chap is a criminal and wants us to think just what you're suggesting," David grinned. "I'm on Dickie's side about birdwatchers. Let's go and see Mr Sparrow, James, and then we'll take up your offer and have lunch with you."

Actually it was Mr Sparrow who gave them lunch. They arrived at *The Golden Lion* just as he was locking the door of the shop, and when James explained briefly that he was involved in investigating the fake jewellery racket and wanted to ask his advice, he was at once interested.

"And so am I, Mr Wilson. Perhaps it would be correct to say interested rather than directly concerned, but I have had two customers this morning inquiring about Victorian jewellery and both of them were aware that much of what is offered today is not genuine. You must all lunch with me - presumably these young people know as much about this affair as we do. I know that David has a habit of becoming involved in dramatic events. Come with me and we will discuss this matter."

He took them to his hotel - which was not that at which the Grahams were staying - and over a leisurely meal he confirmed what James already knew about the racket. Peter then told him about her father's recent experience with Jones and of their previous meeting and of their suspicions of his activities. She did her best to describe the man with the scar, but Mr Sparrow could not remember anybody like that coming into the shop.

"I shall recognize him now after what you tell me, my dear, but I do remember that your father was disturbed at seeing a strange man looking at

us both through the shop door. Perhaps they did recognize each other. Perhaps the stranger wanted to come in and see me, but didn't care to do so because your father knew him? I am sorry that we all seem to be becoming involved in this unpleasant business, but I will do anything I can to help you expose this swindle, Mr Wilson... Ah yes, to be sure. The two inquiries this morning. I was not particularly suspicious of either of them, but the second man was a trifle eccentric although he knew what he was buying when he chose my Georgian candlestick. It was very choice. Could I describe these men? Of course..."

None of them recognized the man called Major Graham who was looking for a house in the district and coming back later with his wife.

"He told me that Mrs Graham was house-hunting but that she was fascinated by Victoriana. He was a pleasant fellow and knowledgeable. I gathered he was staying in the town but he did not leave an address and is not in this hotel. I am certainly expecting another call from the Grahams.

"The second man came into the shop just before the Major left. He was even more knowledgeable and anxious to know something more about Graham and where he was staying. Said he would like to chat with him about their common interest which was Victorian jewellery. He gave his name as Robert Ruddy and he is staying at the *Shropshire Lad* in Craven Arms. Odd character, dressed in an old-fashioned tweed suit and hat. But intelligent. Undoubtedly knowledgeable. Didn't seem to me like a criminal, but you never know. Didn't try to sell me anything either. Why don't you look him up in Craven Arms?... Yes, David. Now you mention it, he had a case of binoculars slung over one shoulder."

"We know about him, Mr Sparrow," Peter said. "None of us have actually seen him, but the twins saw him snooping about a deserted cottage on the top of the Mynd and spoke to him. He's a birdwatcher - or so he says. Dickie is suspicious of him and I believe they are out looking for him today... Now, James, what are you going to do? I'm going to show David the riding stables where I work, and then we're going to get a bus to Barton Beach and see Jenny, and if necessary we'll telephone Tom and ask him to drive over later and fetch us. Maybe we'll pick up my father at Seven Gates

too... Thank you, Mr Sparrow, for the most magnificent lunch. Lucky us, to meet you on your doorstep."

So James went off to explore the villages and promised to come back to Witchend that evening and tell them how he had got on. He would telephone if he was going to be late.

Mr Sparrow then beamed benevolently on the young couple and asked them to tell Mr Sterling that he would come over to Witchend tomorrow, and at last David and Peter found themselves alone.

"Well, now for the stables," David said. "Try not to fret and let's enjoy ourselves. We'll telephone Jenny presently - we know she's at home - and make sure your father is safe and sound at Seven Gates by the same method. Show me where you're learning to be a working woman, sweetie, and on the way I want to buy you a present."

"David! I'd forgotten but I've bought one for you. While you were in the newspaper office. I do hope you'll like it. It's very bold, trendy and dashing."

From her bag she produced the tie and if David was shocked he did not show it. He did all the right things. First he kissed her, then he took off the shabby green tie he had been wearing for months, threw it in a nearby litter bin and then made her tie the new one for him.

On the way to the stables they tried three shops before he found a cherry-red silk scarf which she tied over her hair before they left the shop. Hand-in-hand they were wandering down some side streets without even mentioning the man with the scar. Half-way down a narrow street called Primrose Lane a man who was lifting a heavy TV set from the back of a van swung round suddenly on to the pavement, crashed into Peter and knocked her off balance so much that she cried out and fell. As David helped her up the man himself stumbled and only just saved the set from falling. With his back to them he unlocked the door of his shop, pushed the set over the threshold and then turned and swore at them.

"...and why don't you look where you're going, you clumsy, love-sick young idiots-----" and then some more unprintable words.

David was so angry that having got Peter on her feet he was prepared to deal with the clumsy bully, but she held on to him and whispered, "No, David. Leave him. Let's go."

Her tights were split at the knee which was bleeding and there were tears of vexation and pain in her eyes as they watched the man slam the shop door and heard the bolts slip home.

"He must be mad," David said. "Absolutely raving. I'm so sorry. What are we going to do about your knee?"

"Whatever we do I've got to buy new tights," she smiled shakily. "I just didn't notice him so I s'pose it was partly our fault... Look who's coming."

A little woman with a thin face and greying hair was hurrying across the street.

"I saw it all, my dear. You've hurt your knee. Come in and sit down for a minute and have a cup of tea. And your boy-friend, o' course."

They were glad to do this. Peter was distressed and in pain and David obviously had something else on his mind. While Mrs Collins took Peter away for repairs, he went to the window and from behind the curtains, used with such good effect by their hostess for the same purpose, he watched Sid Edwards's radio shop. There was no name on the van and he could not see its number. He had just decided to go out again and make a note of it when Mrs Collins came downstairs and fussed about with kettle and teapot, talking all the time. When David dared to interrupt her and look round, the van was driving away. Peter came down a few minutes later with an adhesive plaster on her knee and sat down thankfully to enjoy her tea.

Mrs Collins was curious. She wanted to know where they lived and why they were in Primrose Lane, but David managed without much difficulty to get her on to the subject of Mr Edwards.

"Well, I must say he's a very peculiar man. Only been here about a fortnight. Sometimes he's here with the shop open, but more often than not he closes it and goes off on his own in that van and sometimes on a motor bike. Pleasant enough but doesn't want to speak to his neighbours, though he knows his job and don't charge much for repairs... Lives by himself over the shop but says he's got a wife and boy coming soon... Of course I'm the sort that keeps meself to meself, and what goes on over there is nothing to do with me, but some of his visitors are quite smart like... And sometimes he's out at night on his motor bike... No business o' mine, of course, but I happened to be looking out of the window just now and saw him knock you down-----"

Peter realized that David was anxious to get away. She sensed his excitement, and after another five minutes, which it took them to express their gratitude and make their escape, they found themselves alone on the pavement.

"Just a sec, David," she said as she took his arm. "I know what you're thinking, but I can't hurry. Never mind the stables now, but you believe we've found Dad's Henry Jones, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. You couldn't see him when he knocked you down and I didn't see him very well because he was wearing a cap pulled well over his forehead. But I'm fairly sure of the scar, although I couldn't match him up with the photo I saw in the paper this morning. But it all begins to fit. I suppose he couldn't have recognized you, could he? Was he anything like the man on the motor bike who nearly knocked you down in the Witchend lane?"

"He might have been, but he was wearing goggles then. I don't think he recognized me just now. I'd got your scarf on and different clothes, and when he was on his bike he was in a rage because Dad had recognized him... Pity James has gone, David. He must hear about this. While I'm in this shop you go up to the post office and telephone Seven Gates. See if my father has arrived and, if he has, ask him to wait for us, and if James calls tell him we'll be at Jenny's because it's quicker on the bus for us to get there than to Seven Gates... I'll join you at the post office and find out about the buses."

All this made sense, so having sorted out his loose change, David shut himself in the telephone box. Trudie answered at Seven Gates and told him that Mr Sterling and Brock had just arrived. She was rather bewildered about the message to James Wilson but did not waste time asking difficult questions.

David then wiped the perspiration from his forehead and made ready for Jenny who he knew would not give him a chance to say much. He was right.

"Oh, David, it's you. And Peter's there too? And Tom? Is he with you and has he sent a message?... I see. No, I s'pose he couldn't if you haven't seen him, but I did telephone Ingles this morning. I'm stuck here until Dad comes back from Shrewsbury, but it will be wonderful to see you and Peter..."

Here she paused for breath and David was able to get a word in.

"Yes, that's fine, Jenny. Peter and I are on our way and we've got lots to tell you. Have you seen the twins and Harriet?"

"No, David. Are they coining too? You're not sure? People often aren't sure about the twins, are they, and I'm longing to see Harry. Oh! Listen, David. I've got something to tell you. Most peculiar things are going on here. There are mysterious people in that ghastly Greystone cottage and people keep on asking for lonely cottages round here. It's all very odd and we're getting fed up with it. Do come quickly because I'm absolutely neglected and missing Tom..."

"O.K., Jen. We're on our way. Peter's waiting for me and we must dash for a bus."

He staggered out into the comparatively fresh air of the post office, but there was no time nor opportunity to say much to Peter until the bus they had caught was nearly empty and they could talk freely. She was relieved to know that her father was safely at Seven Gates and excited to hear Jenny's news about Greystone Cottage, but before they had time to discuss this the bus stopped in Barton Beach and there was Jenny herself waiting to greet them.

She was pink with excitement and looking very pretty as she hugged Peter and, to his surprise and pleasure, kissed David impetuously.

"Dad's back now and the shop will close soon so I'm free. Where shall we go and gossip?"

"We haven't time now to tell you everything that's been happening to us since we arrived," David answered. "We've been worried with strangers too and we're excited about what you told me on the phone about Greystone. Will you come with us there at once and on the way we can exchange news about strangers, O.K.?"

"O.K.," Jenny nodded. "Not only O.K. but super. I can't say how wonderful it is to see you. Living here is like being in a desert. In the very middle of it too. I suffer from desertion, David. I'm a deprived girl, honestly I am, but I'll tell everything I can."

Jenny never missed an opportunity of talking and neither David nor Peter had much chance to tell their story. She told them first of all that a Mr and Mrs Smith had moved into Greystone End a few weeks ago and that they must have come in the night because nobody had seen a furniture van.

"Nobody until about half an hour ago had seen Mr Smith. Old Bert the postman has had two or three letters addressed to him, and Mrs Smith comes into the shop sometimes but she's a misery. She was very, very rude to me this afternoon and in a fearful state 'cos the Shrewsbury bus had gone before she got here. I think she's unhappy. Sort of woman with a secret, David. And then there was the other woman this afternoon. Quite a lady she was, Peter. She came in while Mrs Smith was in a state, and the extraordinary thing is that she was asking about Greystone too. She said she was looking for a cottage to rent and I told her about Mrs Smith, and there's another peculiar thing. While I was waiting for you a man we know told me he'd seen a man who must have been the mysterious Smith running down the street and rushing into the telephone box outside our shop. But I didn't see him and so something must have happened without Mrs Smith - but David, you haven't told me a word about your strangers and why you're interested in this mouldy old cottage and here we are nearly there-----"

Greystone wood was as usual damp and gloomy, and as Jenny's chatter died down she noticed that David was not looking at her, nor at Peter, but at the fresh marks of more than one car in the soft soil of the rough track that led to the cottage.

"Let's not talk," he said quietly. "Maybe something odd is going on in that place? I'll go first. The cottage is just round that corner, isn't it, Jenny?"

She nodded. Her heart was suddenly thumping uncomfortably as Peter took her hand and David went ahead. As the track swung to the left and the trees thinned out he waited for them and pointed, without speaking, at a car standing outside the now crumbling walls of the cottage garden. It was empty and none of them recognized it.

"See that window?" Peter whispered. "It's been smashed from inside."

She was right. Wooden shutters were across all the windows on the ground floor except one where part of a shutter had broken away and broken glass was on the ground beneath.

"But whose car?" David said. "Where's the driver? We'd better look round."

Suddenly Jenny clutched his arm as a woman came slowly round the corner of the cottage. She was the smart woman who had been kind to her in the shop this afternoon. They recognized each other at once.

"The place is empty," Mrs Graham said in a strained voice. "Something has happened here. He's gone. The back door is open and there's a dead dog... Get out of my way all of you. I'm going."

They turned to watch her as she got into the car and drove off. Peter moved first and ran round behind the cottage. There, lying in the long grass was the body of a brave little black Scottie dog. With a cry of horror she went down on her knees, gathered his blood-stained body into her lap and cradled him. Then Jenny was beside her with tears streaming down her face. They heard David fling back the door and storm into the house shouting for the twins, and then Peter, with hands tenderly caressing Macbeth's body, felt the faintest movement of his heart.

"He's alive, Jenny. I'm sure he is. Fetch David."

Then he was there with one arm round her shoulders. "I'm sure he's alive, David. I can feel his little heart very, very faintly. I s'pose the twins and Harry have been here?"

"Oh, yes. Locked in the front room with the broken shutter. I found Dickie's old penknife... We're in real trouble now. I've also found one of the secret workshops James has been looking for... Brave, wonderful Macbeth. I bet he fought for them."

Gently he touched the dog's black muzzle, noticing that it was bruised and swollen. Peter felt Macbeth sigh and then his eyes opened a fraction and very, very gently he licked David's fingers...

10. Friday: Beacon Cottage

With his back to the open door of the room in Greystone Cottage in which the four children had been imprisoned, the man with the scar stared at them in silence.

Harriet was standing in front of the twins and Kevin behind them. Mary was on her knees holding back the snarling Macbeth, and Dickie was trying to look braver than he felt. Charlie Smith, with a cigarette dangling from between his lips, was fidgeting in the hall just behind his boss.

Then Jones threatened Mary.

"Keep that dog quiet else I'll do it for you." Then, over his shoulder to Smith, "How long they been here? How long since you ran to the village to telephone? When's your missus coming back?"

"Two hours or more ago. Spying at me through the window they were so I had to tell you, didn't I? They saw me working. I told you I dunno where my missus is. I warned you. She don't like this place."

"That's right, Charlie. You told me. You talk too much. Get out and pack everything in the van. We're moving out but there's a few things I want to know from these nosey kids. Get weaving, Charlie, and close the door after you."

Then Kevin found some unexpected courage. He stepped forward and stood beside Harriet.

"I know you. You come to see my dad in Birmingham. You're his pal, aren't you? Why did he lock us in here? I come to see my mum because they wouldn't tell me about this place. Wouldn't tell me where they were. Or about what he's doing and making in that back room... You get us out of here. He's no right to keep my friends locked in-----"

For the first time Jones stepped right into the room, and turned on Kevin in fury.

"Shut up, you whining brat. You've never seen me before. Keep quiet till I tell you to speak, and that goes for all of you."

There must have been something in his voice which enraged Macbeth. Mary had been doing her best to keep him quiet, but Jones now raised his hand to strike Kevin. Macbeth, who now accepted the boy as one of his own, went into battle as he had often done before. He tore himself free from Mary's restraining hand and attacked Jones. He bit his ankle before the astonished man could defend himself but as Dickie ran forward Jones kicked the dog with his other foot and then snatched up a chair which he held in front of him and easily kept off Dickie, now shouting such curious and rude war cries as, "Down with rat face", and "Tortures for dog-kickers" and, of course, "Up the Lone Piners!" Then Kevin joined in and Jones lost control. With one hand he pushed the two boys back and with the other lifted the chair and crashed it down on Macbeth who was still snapping at his trousers. With a yelp of pain the dog rolled over and Jones kicked him again. Then he raised the chair for another blow which was thwarted by Mary who flung herself at him with angry tears streaming down her face. She beat at him with clenched fists, and as he thrust her back with an oath, he snatched up the dog's body, opened the door and pushed it out.

"Now listen," he said as he closed the door. "I've had enough of you kids... You've got yourselves mixed up in something that doesn't concern you... Stop that snivelling, do as you're told and we'll see about getting you out of this. You're going to tell me who you are, where you live and how you got to know young Smith. You're going to answer questions I ask you or else... You seen what I did to your yapping dog..."

His voice died away in a sort of shame as he looked round at their stricken faces. The girl twin was still crouching on the floor where she had fallen when he pushed her. The bigger girl went down on her knees and put her arms round her and tried to comfort her. But Mary stared at him with great eyes and whispered, "You killed him. You kicked him and you beat him with a chair and, and - and then you threw him out... Just a little dog who was guarding us, and I pray to God-----"

"And another thing," her twin interrupted in a voice thick with unshed tears, "We don't care who you are except that we know you're wicked. And not

only wicked but cruel and stupid, and in case nobody has ever told you we think you're revolting and hideously ugly... We've got lots of very, very important friends. They know where we are and they're on the way now. You'll be sorry. We shan't forget... Stand up, Mary. There's nothing he can do which can hurt us half as much as what he's done already."

Mary gulped back a sob and stood up bravely beside her brother. Kevin was still near the window and Harriet, who had not yet spoken, took a pace forward and faced the bully.

"I'm the eldest. You'd better say what you've got to say to me and then let us out of here. And Kevin comes with us. We brought him here because he wanted to find his mother. He was lost, didn't know the way to this cottage and we helped him. If you don't let us go it means you've kidnapped us, doesn't it?"

This was a brave speech for Harriet because she was very frightened. Jones listened to her with some respect and tried, not very successfully, to be more reasonable. He pulled the chair he had used as a weapon up to the table and sat down.

"O.K., kids. You want to get out and see to that dog. I told you what I'd do to him if you didn't keep him quiet. You know now that I mean what I say. You can clear out and take the tyke with you soon as you tell me why you're here, where you live and what you've got to do with young Smith... Now don't waste time trying to fool me. If you want to get out and take the dog, now's your chance. Are you going to talk?"

They knew they were beaten. It was possible that Macbeth was still alive, and even if he was dead both twins knew that they could not leave him here. Harriet saw them glance at each other and knew what they were thinking, and was suddenly sure that there was nothing else they could do. However much they tried to bluff Jones nobody knew where they were. All that they had told the others was that they might go to Seven Gates and on to see Jenny. Not for the first time Harriet wished they had told Peter and David about Kevin and Greystone. She was wondering just how little they could tell this awful man and hoping that Dickie would guard his tongue when the latter began to speak.

He was not clever. He was angry, frightened and sick with horror at this man who, he believed, had deliberately and with the utmost cruelty killed their dog. He wanted to protect Mary, pride made him struggle not to show his fears to Kevin and Harriet, and so, as he held his head high and faced the crafty Jones, he boasted and gave away information that betrayed them.

Within ten minutes Jones knew that the twins not only knew Mr Sterling but were now living at Witchend. He also learned that a London journalist was in the district investigating the manufacture of faked jewellery and that the four children in this room knew that Smith had been making it in this house. And as the boy twin became more and more excited he boasted that this journalist knew about the Assay Office in Birmingham and that he would soon find them as they had told him that they were going to take the Smith boy to Greystone. It did not take Jones long to realize that this was possible, and when the elder girl disclosed that it was her grandfather who was going to buy *The Golden Lion* in Ludlow and that he knew all about fake jewellery, he realized that there was no time to waste. While listening to these disclosures he had also heard Charlie moving his belongings and equipment out of the house and into the van. It was obvious now that none of these children must be allowed to communicate with any adults or the police until he could get right away after destroying any evidence which would incriminate him. It was galling to realize that his plans had been ruined by four children who, he believed, had told him the truth. The only one who had not volunteered any information was the Smith boy, but he was obviously a poor specimen and his stupid parents were really to blame for mishandling that situation. Presently, when they were away from this benighted place, he would deal with the Smiths who had always been a weakness in his organization.

"Now let us go," Mary demanded. "You promised we should have our dog. If he's dead you're a murderer and we shall never, never forgive you."

Jones got up. "Wait here."

They heard the lock click and they were alone again.

Kevin spoke first. "It's all my fault. I didn't know it would be like this. I swear I didn't. That man said I hadn't seen him with my dad before, but he's

a liar. I know now. He's the man my dad works for and he tells him what to do. And what about her - my mother, I mean? Where's she gone and how am I going to find her now? Where'll we go?"

"You'll go where we go," Harriet said. "It won't be long now before he lets us out and then one of us can run to the village where our friend Jenny lives and where there's a telephone. We'll find your mother, Kevin... And I've not forgotten Mackie, Mary. We'll be with him soon."

But they were not. Jones called the twins first, and as he locked the door behind them, Harriet and Kevin ran across and heard Mary's anguished cry, the sound of a struggle and the curses of the two men. They knew then that Jones had fooled them again.

"They're taking them away," Kevin gasped. "My dad's gone too. They must have killed the dog. What shall we do, Harry? They're going to leave us here."

Harriet sat at the table and covered her face with her hands. She was nearly beaten. They had separated them from their friends. They'd killed Macbeth and they knew now how much was known about them. Jones, she was sure now, was completely ruthless, and although she did not say so, she was certain that he would come back for them.

Charlie came first.

"You're coming with us, boy. With your pals. And this kid too. We don't want no fuss, do we?"

Kevin looked at his father with horror.

"Where's that little dog? Where's my mum? You let that man hurt those twins. What you done with them?"

Charlie's face changed. What was meant to be a smile became a nasty smirk.

"Come on, boy. No fuss, I said. The other two are where they can't make no more trouble. And the dog won't neither. He's had it."

During the last few terrifying hours Harriet had been the bravest. She had done her best to prove her loyalty to the twins and to help Kevin. She hated Jones, but she despised this cruel and cowardly man who seemed to have driven away his wife and to have been utterly callous to his son. And now, with this heartless grin on his face, he was sneering about the killing of a dog. So she lost her temper, rushed at him, and with tears in her eyes shouted that he was a coward and a bully.

Charlie's response was typical. He swung back his arm and pushed her so hard that she stumbled backwards against the table and fell to the floor. For a long moment Kevin stared at his father and then for the first time in his life he tried to fight him. With a curse, just as Jones came back into the cottage, Charlie held Kevin with one hand and snatched off his glasses with the other.

"Now shut up, both of you. Get out. Behave yourselves or I'll smash up his glasses for good."

They gave in. There was nothing else to do. Harriet took Kevin's arm as Charlie pushed them out of the cottage and locked the door. Jones was coming towards them through the wilderness that was once a garden.

"Hurry," he snapped. "You two kids in the back of the van with the others. Make a row and there'll be real trouble. Remember the dog."

He then unlocked the back of the van which was a clutter of old suitcases, boxes, gas cylinders and other equipment. The twins were huddled together in a corner and as soon as Harriet had helped Kevin and clambered in herself, the men locked them in and drove off. It was almost dark inside as there were no windows and the four children were now too cowed and exhausted to protest or even to speak to each other. Later, when they realized where they were, they remembered the van grinding up a long hill in bottom gear and eventually, when it stopped, they guessed correctly that they were in the country because there was no sound of traffic.

Jones, from the driving seat, then turned and pushed back a shutter.

"You won't get hurt if you do as you're told. We're moving house and we're taking you into your new home with your eyes covered. No use shouting because nobody will hear you. No use struggling either. One at a time and the young boy first."

"No," Mary said loudly and firmly. "You're a liar. You said we could go to Mackie. Dickie isn't going anywhere without me and I'm not going anywhere without him."

"And as Kevin can't see without his glasses because of the dirty, cowardly trick you played on him, he isn't going anywhere without me," Harriet protested. "We all know now how brave you both are. We've seen how you fight a little dog. We don't care if you blindfold us and we'll come with you quietly but only if we go together. We mean this. If you try to separate us we shall fight and struggle."

They heard Jones mutter something to Charlie before pushing some dirty dusters and scraps of sacking through the shutter.

"O.K., kids," he said with a trace of respect in his voice. "If you don't want our help, blindfold yourselves properly and we'll take you in together."

"Do as he says," Harriet whispered. "We can't escape now. I believe they're running away, and if only they leave us alone together we'll think of something. Be brave, Mary. They can't separate us now, and try not to fuss too much about your glasses, Kevin. We'll look after you and remember that our friends will find us soon... We'll blindfold each other and don't try to peep, Dickie. Don't give them the excuse for getting rough."

"Fair enough," Dickie whispered. "I think I know where we are anyway."

They tied the dirty rags round each other's eyes as Jones watched them from one of the half opened doors of the van. Then he tested the knots.

"I'm coming out first," Harriet said. "Then the twins and Kevin and we're holding on to each other. Keep your word and we'll keep ours."

Jones led the strange procession, and although Kevin clung to Mary's hand, he refused to touch his father who slouched along in the rear. For a few steps, while they were in the open, the air was wonderfully clean and fresh after the stuffiness of Greystone Cottage and the smell of stale oil and rubbish in the back of the van. They stopped while a door was unlocked. They heard the protest of little-used hinges and stumbled over a stone step into the dank, stale chill of an empty house.

"Stairs up," Jones warned. "And take it easy and keep to the right with your hands on the wall. There aren't any banisters... And you get busy down there, Charlie."

Their groping fingers peeled damp wallpaper from the plaster, and beneath their feet the rotting timber crumbled. Inspired by Harriet's courage and leadership, they made no complaint as they were led across what must have been a big landing into another room.

"You're home, kids," Jones sneered. "See if you like it."

They pulled off their bandages, and only Kevin, rubbing his weak eyes, muttered, "I can't see... He won't let me see." Harriet was again reminded of her dream.

Their new prison was large but only dimly lit because the two windows were boarded over inside. There were patches of damp on the walls, strips of dirty paper were hanging from the ceiling and there were holes in some of the floorboards. The room was empty. No furniture, no rubbish - nothing to show that anybody had ever used it. A dead room, smelling of damp and decay.

They looked round with horror as Jones, with his back to the closed door, said,

"You'll stay here until you're fetched. Don't waste your breath shouting because I shall be the only person here and you'll hurt yourself if you try to get out. There's a lock on the door and I've got the key."

"But you dare not keep us here without anything to eat and drink!" Harriet said. "You dare not. We shall starve. You just can't keep us imprisoned here. You'll be sorry because our friends are looking for us now."

"That's why we've found a new home for you," he grinned.

"I can't think of anything disgusting enough to say to you," Dickie said suddenly, "but I can tell you that if you knew what we're thinking you'd be disgusted with yourself all right. We're hungry and thirsty and you'd better do something about it."

To their surprise Jones opened the door and shouted to Charlie to bring up some tins of food and a jug of water. While they were waiting it was obvious that he was uneasy, and following Harriet's example they turned their backs on him and refused to answer one or two half-hearted attempts to be more friendly. They heard Charlie coming upstairs, heard Jones open the door and drag something into the room, but none of them turned round until they were sure they were alone.

Just inside the locked door was a cardboard carton and an enamel jug of water, and as Dickie ran over to it, Harriet went to Mary who was leaning against the boarded window still looking as if her heart was broken.

"Mary, darling, we all know how you feel, but it's really just as awful for Dickie. You've got to help us get out of here and we can't do without you. And you must help Kevin too, because we're Lone Piners and we're pledged to do this. *He can't see, Mary!* His father took his glasses and he's nearly blind. You've got to be brave and help us... Help Dickie with the food. We'll all feel better when we've had something to eat."

"Come on, twin," Dickie called. "It's not exactly a fabulous banquet but it's real eats. They can't have poisoned what's inside the tins."

Mary smiled bravely at Harriet, and as she went over to Dickie they heard the engine of the van start up, accelerate and then move off.

"So he's a liar again," Kevin said. "My dad can't drive so if they haven't gone off together he's left him downstairs. I reckon he wouldn't do that

though. What shall we do?"

"Eat first," Dickie said promptly. "Here's a tin-opener which may come in useful for more than opening tins. Anybody know where we are? I bet we're in Beacon Cottage. I bet it was Jones who's been messing about here and who put the oil on the locks... Don't worry, Kevin. We'll soon be out of here. Our friends all know we've been here before."

Charlie had been generous with the food he had taken from some secret store downstairs and they had all had enough to eat when Dickie, rummaging about in the bottom of the carton, found the best treasure of all - Kevin's glasses.

"There you are, Kevin," Harriet said triumphantly. "Your father was sorry he did that to you. That proves that he's not so bad really."

This discovery gave them all fresh hope. With the patient use of the tin-opener they loosened a nail on one of the boards across the window. The next nail was easier and then, with their combined strength, they wrenched the board out of the rotting sill. Kevin then smashed the glass with one of the tins. Clean, fresh air flowed into the room and they looked out across the heather of the Mynd towards the Stretton Hills. It was nearly dusk and the silence intense. Outside the window was a broad ledge and gutter, and as there seemed to be no way of breaking down the door of their prison Harriet offered to crawl along the ledge which, she remembered, ran the length of the house and break into another room and get downstairs that way. In their excitement they forgot that Charlie might still be downstairs or that Jones might have returned. Kevin, now that he could see again, was a changed character and insisted on going first along the ledge. Dickie went next, Harriet and Mary following. With the slats wrenched from the first window the boys broke the glass of the next and kicked in the rotting boards. This room was also empty and unused, but the door was ajar and with Dickie in front they all crept down the dangerous stairs. The front door was locked and barred and Harriet, surprisingly hand-in-hand with Kevin, called to Dickie,

"They must have taken us in the back door. Go through the kitchen and we'll break our way out somehow... Don't worry any more, Kevin. We're

safe now. We'll soon find your mother."

They hurried through the kitchen which was ankle deep in tins and bottles, beer cans and soiled cartons. Dickie reached the back door first and to his surprise found it ajar. Two inches of golden evening light tempted him to freedom. He flung back the door, but as the others pressed forward they saw, over Dickie's shoulder, a man standing only a few feet away.

"Don't come out, children," he said quietly. "Go back into the house. I have some questions to ask you."

The man was Robert Ruddy, the birdwatcher.

11. Friday: Fire like a Red Flower

"What shall we do, David?" Peter whispered as she held the little dog in her arms. "We must find the others but we can't leave Mackie. He's just alive and p'raps we can save him."

David, still with one hand on Macbeth's shaggy head, sat back on his heels and looked up at Jenny.

"Stay with Peter, Jenny, and help to carry Macbeth, as gently as you can, back to the village. Be careful of his right foreleg which looks as if it's broken. He's been beaten with something heavy. Your father is home now, isn't he? Good. I'm going to run back ahead of you and telephone. We've first got to tell the police everything we know and that the twins and Harriet have disappeared. And I'll ring Seven Gates too."

"Wait for us in the village, David," Peter pleaded. "Don't go on somewhere else without leaving a message."

Almost before she had finished speaking David was on his way. For a few minutes he was too angry to think coherently. First he blamed himself for allowing the twins and Harriet to go off alone. He had been so sure that they were sharing a secret, and because he wanted to go off with Peter he had not bothered to make them tell the truth. And in his parents' absence he, and not Mr Sterling, was responsible for them and, indeed, for Harriet. What was he going to tell the gentle, generous Mr Sparrow about Harriet who meant so much to them all? He had not told Jenny and Peter about the front room in the cottage where he had found Dickie's broken penknife and had seen many signs of a struggle. Obviously the three children had been abducted from here - probably because they had found one of the secret workshops for which James Wilson was also searching.

After a while he was forced to slow down, and while he leaned against a tree to regain his breath he looked again at the tyre marks of two cars in the soft soil of the track. And this reminded him of the woman who had been leaving Greystone Cottage as they arrived and had obviously been looking

for somebody. "He's gone," she had said. "The place is empty." Who was she and for whom was she looking?

So many strangers, as one of them had said. What parts were they playing in the drama in which they had become involved? Suddenly his memory of something vital clicked into place like the shutter of a camera. He remembered the number of the car - NKE 751F. Remembered too that as the woman had driven off and as Peter and Jenny were running to find Macbeth, he had instinctively memorized that number. As he ran on he repeated it to himself again and again. This might be the clue they needed and he dared not forget it.

Mr Harman was pushing up the sunblind over his shop window when David ran with faltering steps up the village street, and he had to help David up the step and into a chair.

All the Lone Piners liked Jenny's father. Like Mr Sterling, he was a gentle man, devoted to his only daughter. He approved of her attachment to Tom Ingles and was always happy to see Peter, David and the twins.

"Steady, David. Steady. Take your time. When you're ready tell me what's wrong... Not our Jen, is it?"

David shook his head.

"No, sir. Jenny and Peter will be here soon with our dog. Somebody's tried to kill him at Greystone Cottage and the twins and Harriet Sparrow have been abducted. Please may I use your telephone? The police must be told and I want Charles Sterling at Seven Gates. He'll help us."

Mr Harman nodded and led him into the little office behind the post office counter. David could not remember the farm's telephone number so Mr Harman found it for him and then asked if he would like him to go and meet the two girls and help with the dog.

"I am alone here, David, as my wife has gone into Bishop's Castle to see a friend. Where can I be of most help?"

David, dialling the number, asked him to stay so that he could hear more details.

Charles Sterling, Peter's cousin, fortunately answered the telephone and David told him as briefly as he could what had happened.

"Please, Charles," he begged. "Don't ask questions now. We'll tell you everything just as soon as we can get to you, but will you tell the police at Ludlow that the twins and Harriet Sparrow have been abducted. Tell them that the woman driver of a cream Cortina NKE 751F should know something interesting about Greystone Cottage. Is Peter's father still with you? Good. Please tell him what has happened and keep him there till we come. When I left the girls, Macbeth was still alive, but if Trudie could come in the car to Mr Harman's shop and pick us up with the dog, maybe she could take him in to her father at Bishop's Castle... Thanks very much, Charles."

Next, after reminding Mr Harman that Trudie's father, Mr Whittington, was a veterinary surgeon, David telephoned Ingles and spoke to Tom who had just come in from work. He told him briefly of the events so far and asked him to go round to Witchend at once and see that all was well there. If neither the twins nor James had returned, would he leave a note and ask whoever came in first to telephone Seven Gates at once.

"O.K., David. Will do. My love to Jen and tell her I'm on my way on the motor bike. I must tell Uncle Alf and ask him to look out for James. What about old man Sparrow? Does he know yet? I reckon his shop will be closed now. If you'll be at Seven Gates soon, better ask Mr Sterling to find him at his hotel and tell him... Not to worry too much, David. Those twins have been in scrapes before now and whoever is concerned in this business is going to be in real trouble before long. Cheerio!"

As David replaced the receiver he heard Mr Harman opening the shop door to the two girls who were very tired and distressed. Macbeth was still alive but barely conscious, and while they were trying to decide what to do for him, Trudie Sterling arrived in the Seven Gates estate car. She wasted no words but took the dog gently from Peter's arms and laid him in the basket she had brought and put on the shop counter.

"His leg is broken," she said quietly. "Poor brave little Macbeth, but I think my father will save him and I'll take him right away to his surgery. I've telephoned him and he's expecting me. I'll drop you girls and David at the bottom of our lane. No news of the twins, I suppose? Try not to worry too much. Charles has already told the police. Sorry to rush off, Mr Harman, but we must save the dog. We'll take care of Jenny and telephone any news to you at once."

All that she said in the car as she drove very fast was to confirm that the smart woman in tweeds who had called at the shop and been to Greystone had also visited the farm earlier in the afternoon.

"I didn't care for her. Silly woman who put on airs and asked impertinent questions. I sent her packing."

The others were too miserable to say much as they toiled up the lane to the farm. Mr Sterling was waiting for them by the white gate into the farmyard.

"Charles suggested that I should telephone Mr Sparrow and tell him that Harriet is missing," he explained. "He is extremely upset and is contacting the police himself. He'll come here as soon as he can. You had better come into the house now and tell Charles everything you know. I understand that the police are already on the way to Greystone and that Inspector Cantor is coming here... And indeed here he is."

A black saloon car driven by a plain-clothes sergeant drove into the yard, and as Charles Sterling came out of the house Inspector Cantor got out of the car and shook hands with him and then with Mr Sterling. He looked at David, Peter and Jenny with less enthusiasm. He knew them all and had already worked on two problems in this district in which the Lone Piners had been involved.

"No news here of the twins?" he asked curtly, and when they shook their heads, "Talk in the house, please. My driver will bring us any news that comes in on the radio. They're going through Greystone now. What's this about a woman who was there when you three arrived and found the dog? Tell me again."

David repeated all they knew.

"We'll find that woman," Cantor said grimly, and then smiled suddenly at the three Lone Piners. "Nice work remembering what she looked like as well as the car and the number. She'll have more to tell us... Now, Mr Sterling, what's all this about a man with a scar called Jones? I seem to remember that character."

Mr Sterling told him everything, including the encounter at Witchend when they recognized each other, and also about Jones's interest in Mr Sparrow's *Golden Lion* in Ludlow. Cantor confirmed that the latter would be brought here in another police car shortly and that he had already given them a description of Harriet.

Peter and David then took up the tale with their adventure in Primrose Lane with the radio engineer calling himself Sid Edwards.

"We think he's Jones," Peter said. "He had a scar above his eye. David went with James Wilson of the *Clarion* to the Shrewsbury newspaper office this morning and looked up reports of the case and saw photographs of him. And the woman who lives opposite the shop says he's got a van and a motor bike... And we heard a bike on the top of the Mynd the other night-----"

"Steady, girl, steady. Let me send out a police call for Jones. We certainly want him first."

"And you'll want those Smiths," Jenny shouted. "The Smiths who lived in Greystone. Mrs Smith came into our shop in a real state this afternoon. She wanted to get to Shrewsbury in a hurry."

"So we do, red-head. Come out to the car with me and describe Mrs Smith. Pity nobody seems to know what her husband looks like."

"I bet the twins and Harry know," David said. "I wonder if the tyre marks of a second car I saw at Greystone are those of Jones's van?"

When Cantor and the excited Jenny came back, the Inspector asked about James Wilson. David told him about the manufacture of fake jewellery and

he admitted at once that the police knew all about that and agreed also with David that Smith was undoubtedly one of the craftsmen and was working at Greystone.

As he went out to his car again, Trudie came back from Bishop's Castle. One look at their faces confirmed that there was no news of the missing children but she was able to reassure them about Macbeth.

"Father is sure his wounds are only superficial although he's terribly bruised. He thinks the leg will set and it's now in plaster. He's had an injection and he'll sleep for hours. He's been very brave, David, and I'm sure we'll save him. Father will keep him until he's sure... Now it's no use all of us looking so mournful. Let's make some tea."

Before the kettle had boiled more news came in. The pieces of the jigsaw were beginning to fit and the atmosphere lightened. The first message was that the missing Mrs Smith had been in touch with the Wolverhampton police saying that her son Kevin was missing and that she had received a note from him threatening to run away from the cafe where they had left him.

"Now we know the twins' secret," David said. "I bet the missing boy broke into the Witchend larder and that the twins found him and befriended him."

"Just what they would do," Peter agreed. "They kept the secret and took him to Greystone. Perhaps his father has kidnapped them, but why should he?"

Then the telephone in the hall rang. Charles answered it and came back for David.

"James here. I'm at Witchend after getting your message at Ingles. What's going on? They told me about the twins and young Harriet. Any news of them yet? No, there's no sign of life here. Everything locked up safe and sound. I'll come over to Seven Gates at once. Tell me the quickest way."

David did so and added the news about Greystone and was hardly back with the others before Tom roared into the farmyard on his motor bike. Jenny rushed out to welcome him and clung to his arm as he came into the house.

They were explaining the latest situation to him when another police car arrived with Mr Sparrow. He was obviously very shaken, but behaved with his usual dignity when he explained that he had told the police about Major Graham and Robert Ruddy and his suspicions of them.

While the old man was talking, David went over to Charles Sterling.

"I must ask your advice, Charles. I think I should telephone my parents. They don't know what's happened. What do you think?"

"Yes, David. I'm sure you should, but here's the Inspector again and he looks as if he's got news."

"I'm going back to Ludlow now," Cantor announced. "I'm grateful to you all for your help, and I want you to know that I'm reasonably sure that we shall soon find the children. Police all over the Midlands are looking for them and I'm equally sure that neither Jones, the man Smith nor Major Graham and the woman, who is probably his wife, will be at large for long. I may as well tell you that we've been to Edwards's shop in Primrose Lane. It is closed and there is no sign of occupation. A woman living opposite told my men that he had come back about two hours ago in his old van which he left outside for about half an hour. When he came out he was carrying a metal toolbox and wearing engineer's overalls. The woman volunteered that he worked very odd hours and closed the shop this afternoon. After driving off in the van he left it in the garage he had hired at the bottom of the street. Plenty of signs in the van that the children had been in it. There's some suspicious equipment in it too. Very interesting situation. I'll ring here as soon as we get any news or if I want any more help from any of you."

Then the telephone rang again and Charles left the door open as he went into the hall to answer.

"Sterling, Seven Gates," they heard him say, and then excitedly, "Dickie, you little devil! Where are you? Ludlow police station? And you're all safe?... Wait. They're all shouting and crowding round me here. What? Special message for Inspector Cantor... Sure you're all O.K.? You've got what? Kevin! Good, we know about him."

They crowded round him while he gestured to them to keep quiet. Suddenly Trudie snatched the receiver.

"Dickie! It's Trudie. Listen, Dickie. I must tell you that David, Peter and Jenny found Mackie... He's with my father now. I took him myself... No, you silly boy. *He's not dead*... His leg is broken but it will mend... Hold on, Dickie..."

As she held out the telephone to the Inspector, the others saw the tears in her eyes.

"Speak gently to him," she whispered. "The boy's crying."

Cantor took the receiver and they were all quiet as he spoke.

"Take it easy, boy. All four of you are to wait there until I come. Tell the sergeant from me to take you down to the canteen and give you anything you want, and tell Kevin Smith that his mother will soon know he's safe. We'll bring her to him as soon as we can... O.K. Good! And you've told the sergeant where you've been? Yes. I know the place. And how did you get to Ludlow? A birdwatcher brought you? Did he now! Mr Ruddy. Oh yes, son. We know Mr Ruddy. He's a good friend of ours."

At the other end of the telephone in Ludlow police station, Dickie shouted excitedly,

"What did you say, Inspector? It sounded like Mr Ruddy is a friend of yours... He is? Just hold on a sec, please..." Then, to the now benevolent-looking birdwatcher who was sitting back comfortably in a chair and smoking a large pipe, "You heard what I said, Mr Ruddy. Who are you really? I believe you've jolly well tricked us. We thought you were sinister."

Mr Ruddy beamed. "I'm a watcher of lots of things besides birds, Richard. You'll hear more presently. Now ask the Inspector if Mr Sparrow is there as Harriet would like to speak to him, and I expect you would like to know as much as I would of the whereabouts of Mr James Wilson... Ask now, Richard."

Dickie addressed the Inspector again, and after getting the answer he wanted, handed over the receiver to Harriet.

Also in the room with the four excited and exhausted children was burly Police Sergeant Lloyd and a slim policewoman who had just passed Mary a clean handkerchief to wipe her grubby, tear-stained face and told her that if she wished to do so she could call her Kate.

"Thank you very much, Kate," Mary whispered while Harriet was talking to her grandfather. "It seems a bit silly to cry when you're happy, but we thought that man had murdered our little dog and now, you see, we've just heard that he isn't dead. I expect you'll understand. Macbeth is very, very important to us all in our family."

Meanwhile Dickie joined Sergeant Lloyd who was talking kindly to the bewildered Kevin and gave the latter the message from Inspector Cantor about his mother.

"Don't you worry, Kevin. These police are good. We've met this Inspector Cantor before, and we've done some jobs together, I can tell you. They'll find your mum... And I've got a message for you too, Sergeant. From my friend the Inspector, I mean. He says you're to take us down to your canteen and give us anything we want and wait until he comes."

"Will do," the Sergeant grinned. "Good news about the little dog, son. Glad to hear it. Got a Scottie at home myself. Fine little fighters. What's yours?"

"But of course our Macbeth is a Scottie, Sergeant."

Harriet suddenly interrupted, "Come quickly, Dickie. James has just arrived at Seven Gates. They've told him about us and he says he must speak to you."

The irrepressible boy twin was now hopping from one foot to the other with excitement as he shouted down the telephone:

"I've got it, James. I've got a story for you. It's utterly fantastic. I'll give you an interview. We'll tell you everything and Mackie is going to be O.K. Did

you know that they tried to murder him because he fought for us? Did you know that? And did you know that they locked us up in Greystone Cottage and then because this foul man with a scar was absolutely, fantastically terrified of us he took us to Beacon Cottage on top of the Mynd an' we broke out because our new friend Kevin was very brave and now we've got to know Mr Ruddy who turns out to be a sort of non-birdwatcher who knows about birds, if you know what I mean... O.K., James. Come as quick as you can. We'll be in the story, won't we? Good-oh! And exclusive... Good old James. Good old Lone Piners!... Cheerio, then. See you soon..."

"And what, might I ask, is a Lone Piner?" Mr Ruddy inquired as the exhausted boy replaced the receiver and staggered across the room. Mary, who was leaning on the table with her head on her arms, looked up admiringly at her twin. She was still clutching Woman Police Constable Kate's handkerchief as she gave Dickie the famous Morton grin and then switched it on to Mr Ruddy.

"You're not the only one round here that knows about birds, Mr Non-birdwatcher. Just listen to this," and pursing her lips she whistled the peewit's plaintive cry which had always been the Lone Piners' secret call to each other. Then she looked up at the policewoman.

"My tummy is rumbling, Kate," she explained. "We are utterly famished. Please take us to your eating place. We are also exhausted but suddenly everything is fun again... Come on, Kevin. Come and cheer up with us. I bet you've never been in a police station before."

Kevin managed a feeble smile as they followed W.P.C. Kate downstairs. He was pleased to find Harriet at his side, and when she slipped her hand in his without saying anything, he believed that she was the only one of his new friends who could guess that in spite of everything that had happened, he was wondering about his father.

There were smiles and friendly words for them in the canteen, and Inspector Cantor arrived when Dickie was halfway through his second helping of eggs and chips. He sat down with them and patiently listened to their story again and asked them a few questions. They were interrupted twice by messages from the Control Room. The first was that the couple known as

Major and Mrs Graham had been stopped in their cream Cortina in Hereford and were helping the police with their inquiries. The next time the Inspector came back from the telephone, he spoke directly to Kevin.

"Your father is on his way here, Kevin. He has told some of my men that he wants to see me - and you too. We'd all better go upstairs now and after you've had a word with him we'll send you all back to Witchend in a police car. Your mother may soon be here too."

The boy stood up and faced the Inspector.

"I want to go there now, sir. I don't want to see my father ever again. I'll see my mum and I'll go with her, but I won't see my father."

"Try not to feel like that," Harriet pleaded. "You can't hate him for always. Honestly you can't, Kevin. Don't forget that he sent your glasses back to you. I'm sure that was his way of showing you he was sorry. Don't you see that if he's coming with the police now that proves he was sorry?"

Kevin did not seem convinced. Although he was no longer hungry he was so tired that he could not stop yawning. As they went upstairs to the waiting-room again, Harriet whispered, "Come to Witchend with us tonight anyway, and p'raps in the morning there'll be news of your mother and you can see her first. Don't worry any more now."

Then Mr Ruddy, after a few friendly words, said that he must go. He promised to see them or telephone them at Witchend tomorrow.

"I wouldn't mind a personally conducted tour of that secret camp of yours on the side of the hill," he added with his slow smile, and went out to find his blue Mini.

The next excitement was the arrival of James Wilson who was brought into the waiting-room by the Inspector and left alone with them. They all rushed at him and as he kissed the girls Dickie addressed him shakily,

"I did what I could to get a story, James. Me and Mary - an' Harry. She was super. And Kevin too. We're all a bit flaked out now but I reckon we could

give you a proper interview in the morning. Just let us know when you'd like us to come along."

For a moment or two James seemed unusually bereft of words. Then, "Yes, Richard. I'll do that. I'll ask for an appointment. Now you're all going back to Witchend and the Inspector says you can take Kevin. Your grandfather will be there, Harry. He's waiting to see you. Please tell Mr Sterling I may be very late back. He'll understand and I'll hope to see you all in the morning."

"But how do we get back?" Mary said. "Please take us, dear James. We're so tired."

"Come and see," James smiled. "You're going home on the Inspector's orders."

"Not a Z-car!" Dickie gasped. "Not with a blue lamp and a wailing, hooter thing?"

It was, and the uniformed driver allowed the two boys to sit next to him and they took it in turns to switch on the lamp, and when there was not much traffic about they sounded the warning siren. It was dark when they arrived at Witchend, but the gate was open for them, and as Dickie triumphantly announced their return with the siren, David, Peter, Tom and Jenny ran out to meet them. Every light in the old house glowed a welcome. Mr Sterling and Mr Sparrow stood in the porch, and as Harriet rushed at the latter, Kevin stood alone and shy for a few moments until David noticed him and took him over to the others. Mr Sterling, who was quick to notice his embarrassment, spoke first.

"Glad to see you here, Kevin. You can see that we're all rather excited, but you're welcome. My little dog Brock isn't used to such goings-on so will you look after him for me? Take him on the lead down to the stream and just make him feel that somebody can spare some time for him. Thank you, my boy. Very civil of you."

Kevin looked at him in blank astonishment. Nobody had ever spoken to him in such a way before. Perhaps the old bloke did not know who he was? Did

he not realize that he had borrowed some of his food and a little milk? Everybody, especially Harry, was being so decent that he did not know what to say except, "Thank you, Mr Sterling. He's a fine dog." Before he could lead Brock over to the stream, however, Harriet dragged them both over to her grandfather, and once again Kevin found himself surprised that anyone so elderly should speak to him like an old friend.

"How do you do, Kevin? My granddaughter tells me that you behaved with great courage this evening when you were locked up in Beacon Cottage. She says that you crawled along a narrow ledge between two windows and so enabled you all to escape. Well done, my boy... You young people look as if you should all be in bed, but I hope to see you tomorrow morning. What did you think of the police car, Kevin? It's going to take me back to my hotel in Ludlow, so good night to you all."

Harriet stood on tiptoe to kiss him and then they all escorted him to the car, where he sat next to the friendly driver who flashed the blue light as he drove out into the lane.

As the sound of the car died away in the distance, Mary gave a tremendous yawn and said, "I should like it if somebody would telephone Mr Whittington to ask about Mackie, but I don't believe I could stay awake to hear the answer. Do you swear he'll be all right, David? I know that Trudie loves him too, but you're not just saying he'll be O.K. just to comfort us?"

"As if I would," David laughed. "Ask Peter if you don't believe me. I'm sure we'll have Mackie back in a few days, and you'll spoil him so much that he'll get fat. We'll ring up Bishop's Castle in the morning. What about bath and bed for the four heroes?... You're in my room with Dickie, Kevin. I'm going to sleep in the camp and you can come and wake me in the morning. Ask Dickie to lend you some pyjamas."

"What about the dog? Where does he sleep?" Kevin asked unexpectedly, and Peter gave him the answer he wanted, "Put him on the end of David's bed, but if you let him make a row in the night there'll be trouble. I'll tell my father you're looking after him tonight."

But the longest Friday any of them could remember was not over yet. While the younger ones gave up an unequal struggle to stay awake, Mr Sterling brewed coffee while Peter and Jenny cut sandwiches. As the noise upstairs subsided, David went up to collect his own pyjamas.

"Both the boys and the dog are asleep already," he said when he came down. "Do you realize what young Kevin has been through? Makes some of us appreciate how lucky we are, doesn't it?"

"There's a lot I don't know yet," Tom remarked, "but I suppose that's not unusual. Jenny is staying at Ingles tonight and I reckon we ought to be on our way. Uncle Alf and Aunt Betty will want to know anything else that we know, and one of these questions is what your London pal James Wilson is doing - and where?"

"He'll tell us tomorrow," Peter said. "He'll turn up as he always does."

"He was polite enough to send a message by Richard that he might be very late tonight," Mr Sterling announced. "He's probably with the Inspector... I meant to ask you, David, whether your parents have been told that the twins are safe?"

"They don't know that they've been in trouble," David grinned. "I was just going to telephone home from Seven Gates when the message came through from the police. I think it's rather late to go into details now, don't you? They'll be up here in a day or two anyway and I'm sure the twins would rather tell their own story. Do you mind if Peter and I walk back to Ingles with Tom and Jenny?"

But once out of doors again the four of them were tempted to go up through the wood to the camp. And once David had dumped his bundle in his tent they decided that they might as well go up as far as Peter's Rock.

At the rock they paused and discussed for a few minutes the mysterious Mr Ruddy, until Peter said, "Don't let's worry about him now. Dickie, or somebody, said he was coming tomorrow to explain himself. Lucky for us he was on our side. I wonder where James is and whether the Inspector has

caught Jones... Here comes the moon. We can see the cottage now and then let's go home."

They stood up and looked at the smooth line of the Mynd against the clear night sky. Suddenly they saw a pinpoint of green light as the twins had done a few nights ago.

"That chap Jones?" Tom said. "Maybe he's gone back and doesn't know that our four have escaped."

"Listen," Jenny whispered. "Mary said there was a helicopter. I can hear one now."

They all heard it. They listened and strained their eyes as the throb of the engine was suddenly stilled and then David raised his hand and pointed.

"Something going on up there... Moving lights. See them?"

Peter gripped his arm.

"Flames now. Look! A fire!"

"Opening like a red flower," Jenny whispered.

Tom, the practical, spoke the epitaph.

"That's Beacon Cottage that was. I never cared for that place and nobody will put out that fire now... Come on. Let's go to our beds. We can't do anything about what's going on up there and that's a pleasant change. And if you hear something unusual while you're in camp tonight, David, don't bother to come along to Ingles to tell me... Where's my girl?"

"Here, Tom. I was thinking about the twins and Harry and that boy Kevin. Jones had locked them in that cottage and left them. Who did he think would let them out if there was a fire?"

12. Sunny Saturday

By the time Harriet woke next morning the sun was streaming into the bedroom window, and she knew instinctively that it was delightfully and blissfully late. In the next bed Mary slept peacefully, but with a sudden sense of loss Harriet realized that there was no Macbeth curled up on the end of her friend's bed. Then memories of the extraordinary events of yesterday came flooding back, and she knew that she would never forget that terrifying time when they were locked in that shuttered room in Greystone Cottage.

As she lay on her back with eyes half closed against the bright sun of what must be a happier day, she remembered how brave Kevin had been when he had crawled first along the narrow ledge of Beacon Cottage to help them break out of their prison. She remembered too that when he realized they had been betrayed by his father and that he had lost his mother, he had turned to her and shyly accepted the friendship she had offered him. But what was going to happen to him now? The Inspector had promised that they would find his mother, and if his father had actually come to the police of his own free will, surely this meant that he was sorry for what he had done? And if he was, perhaps there was a chance that all three Smiths could live together again and be kind to each other?

And with this comforting thought Harriet sat up and looked at her watch. It was half-past nine and the house was quiet. There was no sound outside except the melody of the brook. Why was she always the first to wake? Was it only yesterday that she had got up early and found Kevin alone in the camp? What would happen, she wondered, if she was first down today? She was now wide awake and considered it might be fun to see if there was anything she could do to help downstairs before the others got up.

She dressed in the bathroom, and from the landing window as she crept downstairs she saw James Wilson's car and wondered when he had got back. James was nice and when he found them safe and sound in the police station yesterday he had kissed her. As she recalled this agreeable experience, she heard somebody in the kitchen. She was not the first up

after all. Peter was fully dressed and, as usual, looked as fresh and well-groomed as if she was going to a party.

"Hello, Harry! Anybody else about upstairs? I've tried to be quiet but you're very welcome. I've got a super idea about breakfast out of doors, but I was just wondering whether I'd take my father a cup of tea. He's generally up first, but I think yesterday was a bit much for him on top of everything else. Come and sit on the table and have a gossip. I've got some news of something that happened last night after you'd gone to bed."

"About James? I see his car is outside."

"No, I don't know when he came in. I didn't hear him but I'm sure he'll have an exciting story to tell us when he does appear. The four of us went up to the rock last night, and we think there was something exciting happening up on the Mynd. We saw a green light, as you did, and a helicopter came down and then there was a fire. We believe Beacon Cottage is burned down."

Harriet stopped swinging her legs and looked at her aghast.

"But that's where they locked us in yesterday. Who set it alight? S'pose we hadn't managed to escape... But perhaps Mr Ruddy would have rescued us? Of course he would. Tell me about it."

While Peter was explaining how they were all standing on the rock when they saw the first flames flicker, "and grow like a red flower", as Jenny had said, Harriet was reminded again of her muddled dream. Even while Peter was talking, Harriet was certain that a fire had appeared in her dream, although this was the first time she had remembered it.

"Don't look so horrified, Harry," Peter went on. "You were all safe. We don't know what actually happened, but we shall when we can get James talking. I bet he was there. And I wouldn't be surprised if our inspector friend Cantor organized it all because you and the twins had told him everything that happened."

"I s'pose it's something like that, Peter. It's all very well for us to be smug because everything seems to be turning out all right, but what about poor

Kevin who hasn't found his mother yet and knows his father is a criminal? It's all rather hateful, and just now when you told me what Jenny said about the fire looking like a red flower, I've remembered that there was a fire in my dream. I want to tell you about it, Peter, before I forget it. You see, some things I remember in it really seem to have happened and I keep on thinking, 'this has happened to me before.'"

"Most of us have had dreams like that," Peter said. "I have. Some are horrid and you're glad to wake up. I told my father about them once and he said that the feeling of 'this has happened to me before' is something to do with time - what was, and what is now, and what is going to happen soon. It was all puzzling but he said that this happens more often to the young than the old... And it's funny, Harry, but he reminded me of an old Shropshire saying -

*Friday's dream on Saturday told,
Is sure to come true, be it ever so old.*

"When did you have your dream?"

So Harriet struggled to remember that muddled nightmare of a dark wood, pinpoints of light and a boy crying, "I can't see, I can't see," and then flames like the opening of a red flower.

"My dream was on Friday morning, Peter, and today is Saturday, and I did hear Kevin cry 'I can't see', when his father snatched his glasses..." Harriet said. Then suddenly her mood changed. She jumped off the table and impetuously held out her hands to Peter.

"But a dream doesn't really matter, does it? It's *now* that matters. It's a lovely morning and if only we can do something to help Kevin we can all be happy again... What shall we do now, Peter? Let me help you."

Peter was explaining that she thought an extended sort of picnic breakfast for everybody out of doors in the sunshine would be a good idea, when David arrived looking tousled and sleepy. Without asking any foolish or unnecessary questions he kissed both girls and said he was going to have a bath.

"Before I go up and before anybody else comes down, I'd like to record that you're both looking gorgeous. Can't think how you do it. I see James is here. Did either of you see him last night? And what about your father, Peter? I suppose you told him what we saw and heard?"

"Yes, he knows. He didn't say much. I hope he slept well. We're going to have breakfast out of doors and we shall want the trestle table out of the barn so please don't be long, but let everybody else sleep on."

While David was upstairs, Tom and a radiant Jenny arrived.

"Good morning, you two," they spoke together, and whilst Jenny joined Harriet Tom continued, "and where is big-boy David? Still snoring in his sleeping-bag? In a bath? Much more suitable. We've had our breakfast so what can we do to help before the chitchat begins?"

Mr Sterling was the next to appear.

"Thank you, Petronella. Considering the unusual events of this week and particularly those of yesterday, I slept soundly and feel refreshed... Good morning, Jenny, my dear. You have been at Ingles no doubt? Good morning, Thomas."

Peter explained her idea of breakfast out of doors and her father agreed and took Tom out to the barn to deal with the tables and benches. Meanwhile the three girls ransacked the larder and were counting out cups, mugs and plates when David came downstairs with the news that James was awake.

"He says that if anyone brought him a cup of tea in bed before he gets up, he'd appreciate it very much, and if Peter would bring him one he'd appreciate that even more. He says I can come too... Actually he's in very good form and I think he wants to tell you not to worry any more about your father, Peter. He won't tell me what happened last night but promises that he will as soon as everyone is up."

"I s'pose there's no reason why we shouldn't spoil him," Peter admitted. "Do you two mind if we go up? There's some tea left in this pot and I would like to know what he wanted to tell me."

James was sitting on the end of his bed in a sumptuous dressing-gown shaving his handsome face with a buzzing electric shaver.

"Thank you, Peter," he said as he switched off. "And very nice you look on a lovely morning. I do like early morning tea, but before I tell everybody what happened last night, I wanted you specially, and David too, to know that the police have got Jones. He's a bad lot, but although he threatened and scared Mr Sterling I'm sure that will never happen again... Run off now and allow me to finish mowing my face... Don't thank me, dear Petronella. I can guess how anxious you've been... Leave the tea and I will be down in ten minutes."

On the landing they met Dickie, Kevin and Brock. Dickie looked at them with suspicion.

"What are you two doing up here looking so smug? Where is my twin and where is James? And what about all those crooks and criminals? And even more vital, what about Kevin's mother and who has spoken to our Inspector this morning? Have any of you had breakfast?"

"We're waiting for you," Peter assured him. "James is here and coming down soon. Tom and Jenny are here. We don't know anything about Inspector Cantor, but you, Dickie, might telephone Mr Whittington and ask about Mackie, and ask Harriet to find out whether her grandfather is coming to breakfast. James has promised to tell us everything that has happened since you fell asleep last night. And how was Brock, Kevin? Did he behave himself?"

"Yes, he did. He's a super dog. I have never seen one of his shape before. I reckon they're rare. When I woke up this morning he was licking my hand... Where's Harry?"

"Come and find her," David suggested. "And you too, Dickie. We all want to know about Mackie. Somebody had better wake Mary."

Peter did so, putting a hand gently on her shoulder.

"Hello, Peter," she whispered. "It's lovely to be here again. Where's everybody?" Then she remembered and sat up in bed and pushed back her hair.

"What's happened? Is there news of Mackie?"

"Dickie is ringing up now but I'm sure he'll be better. Everybody else except James is down and we're having breakfast outside. There were terrific goings-on last night and we think Beacon Cottage is burned down. James will tell us everything."

Mary was out of bed before Peter had finished speaking. "Why didn't Harry wake me? Or you, Peter, who used to be our friend? I s'pose Dickie is looking after Kevin and has utterly forgotten me."

Peter reassured her and ten minutes later they were all out in the sunshine ready for breakfast. Dickie was the bearer of good news about Macbeth, and Harriet reported that her grandfather was in touch with Inspector Cantor and begged them not to wait for him. Mr Sterling, as befitted his seniority, sat at the end of the table, and while the others brought out the picnic breakfast James took the bewildered Kevin aside and told him that both his mother and father were now in Ludlow and that soon he would take him in to them.

"Have the coppers got my dad?" the boy asked in a chokey voice.

"He went to the police himself, Kevin. I can't promise, but I believe that when he has told them all they want to know about the man Jones, your father will be allowed to go. You must be brave about this, but that's what I think will happen. The police may ask you some more questions, and if you tell the truth I'm sure you will help both your parents. I want you to understand that he is now very sorry about what happened yesterday. And remember what I'm telling you now when I tell the others everything that happened last night... Not to worry too much. You're through the worst and so I hope are your parents... O.K., Kevin? Come and have your breakfast."

"O.K. And thanks a lot."

After a whispered word to Mr Sterling who nodded his approval, they all sat down and James turned to Dickie.

"I've got a lot to tell you all, but I've not forgotten, Richard, that you promised me an interview this morning. I'm anxious to do that, but will you permit me to tell my story first so that you all know, at the same time, about the end of the adventure last night? Afterwards you can help me to tidy up the story and we'll do the special interview for the *Clarion* together."

Dickie stifled a yawn and nodded gravely.

"That will be satisfactory to me, James. Please do not keep us in suspense."

James's story filled in the gaps of what most of them knew, but because neither the twins nor Harriet and Kevin were awake at the time, he started by telling them briefly that Jones was caught last night by the police when trying to escape by helicopter from Beacon Cottage which was now burned to the ground - presumably because he wanted to destroy any evidence of the use he had made of it.

"You must all understand that not until Jones has talked freely to the police shall we know what use he made of the place. When he was caught he was certainly carrying a large canvas grip which I believe contained a big haul of stolen gold and other articles. Anyway, he is in custody and is not likely to trouble any of us again unless we are called to give evidence at his trial. Information about Jones was given to the police by Kevin's father and by a couple calling themselves Major and Mrs Graham who were staying in Ludlow and working for Jones. We believe that they were not only professional thieves collecting gold and silver for Jones, but that they also sold the fake jewellery which was made for him by craftsmen like Kevin's father. Mrs Graham was the woman who came into your shop yesterday, Jenny, asking inquisitive questions. She also called on Mrs Sterling at Seven Gates but was not let into the house. Possibly she was looking for something to steal. The police picked them up somewhere south of Hereford because David had remembered the car number. They have also talked freely about Jones and said they were sure that he often received stolen goods from Europe through south and west country ports, and used a helicopter to carry and land them on the top of the Long Mynd by what

used to be Beacon Cottage. The twins and Harriet were the first of you to see the green signal for the pilot to land, and last night, as I'll tell you shortly, Jones fell into the trap set for him by the Inspector. Kevin's father bravely decided to go to the police and has given an account of the man he hated and feared. I told Kevin about this just now and that's all I'm going to say about Mr Smith.

"Last night I was allowed to go with the police. They knew that Jones had left his shop in Ludlow and taken with him a metal toolbox which actually contained a big haul of gold and silver. He must have been keeping this in his radio shop and it seemed now as if he was on the run. We knew from the twins and Harriet that he was certainly using Beacon Cottage occasionally, and it was possible that he might make a getaway from there. He had left his van and taken the motor bike which had also been heard by some of you on the top of the Mynd the other night... What happened was this. Your old friend Inspector Cantor gambled on Jones returning to Beacon Cottage. As you all know, there are not many tracks or roads up which a man could ride a motor bike in the dark. All these ways were watched and all police vehicles hidden, and when Jones came up the steep hill from Asterton they did not detain him, but by radio alerted the Inspector and a small force of police hidden round the cottage. I was there too and we heard him unlock one of the sheds and then saw him light two oil lamps and come out with a large grip and the toolbox. It was too dark for us to see him actually go into the cottage, but two policemen, hiding on the other side of the road, saw him put the green lamp on the ledge between the two gables. We don't know yet what his feelings were when he found that the twins and Harriet and Kevin had escaped."

"Neither do we know what he would have done if they had still been there," David interrupted tersely. "Go on, James. Who started the fire?"

"It began in the shed, but we're fairly sure that as soon as Jones realized that the cottage was empty, he chucked oil about upstairs and set that alight too. The sheds burned fiercely, so obviously Jones wanted to destroy a lot of evidence there. The police will find out more, but there's no doubt that Jones was a receiver of stolen goods, probably a smuggler and certainly involved in the fake jewellery racket. The latter doesn't interest the police as

much as his other activities. Anyway, we waited until the 'copter landed and then as Jones made a run for it, carrying his case of loot, the police caught him and prevented the pilot from taking off. This chap has apparently admitted that he'd worked for Jones before and that Jones had telephoned him at Bristol telling him to come to Beacon Cottage where he was to land as usual as soon as the green light showed and then take him off."

"What about our non-birdwatcher, James?" Mary asked. "I've come to like Mr Ruddy and his mysterious ways. The Inspector said he was an old friend, but he's surely not a policeman, is he? And he said he'd come to see us today."

"No, Mary, he isn't a policeman. He works for the Assay Office in Birmingham. He's more interested in the making and marketing of fake jewellery than the police, but of course they know each other. The police come in when the Assay Office want to prosecute. It's not the manufacture which is an offence, but its sale to the public under false pretences... And here, by the look of the car, is Mr Robert Ruddy himself."

The dusty blue Mini drove through the open gate and Mary ran across to welcome Mr Ruddy. She brought him over to the table, and when he had shaken hands with Mr Sterling he smiled benignly on the Lone Piners.

"Good morning to you all. It's not for me to interrupt such a happy celebration, but I'm off to Birmingham in an hour or two and I wondered if any of you young people would like to come birdwatching with me on the hill before I leave."

It was Dickie who first noticed the twinkle in his eye.

"Thank you for the offer, Mr Ruddy. Actually a few of us have granted an interview to a rather famous representative of the London *Clarion*, so I fear we shall be otherwise engaged."

Harriet, sitting next to Kevin, noticed that he was looking down unhappily at his plate. Suddenly she realized how he must have felt while James was telling his story. He had whispered to her earlier that the reporter had told

him that his parents were both in Ludlow, but now he was obviously afraid of what would be printed about his father in the papers.

"Come up to the camp with me, Kevin," she whispered impetuously. "You'll have to go soon and I want to talk to you. I don't want to be in Dickie's interview... Come on. Nobody will mind."

Harriet whispered something to Peter who nodded agreement, and then swung her legs over the bench and waited for Kevin. Together they ran towards the gate and then the boy looked back, and although the others were staring at them curiously, he saw only a black-and-tan dog sitting in a patch of sunlight and watching him with his head on one side. He whistled softly and Brock rushed at him and gambolled beside them as they walked in silence up the hill.

They were both shy. He tried to find stumbling words of thanks and she interrupted because he found it so difficult.

"But it will work out for you, Kevin. I'm sure it will. And we didn't do much for you really, but it was lucky we were all together yesterday, wasn't it? Everybody says how brave you were to go out on that ledge... And we want to see you again. You must let us know where you go to live. If it's not too far away we could all meet here again. You will do that, won't you? I want to know what happens to you, Kevin."

He looked down at Witchend in the sunshine and stooped to stroke Brock.

"It was Jones who made my dad do those things. I know it was. My dad is very, very clever, Harry, and he's sick too. Mum told me so and he won't go to hospital. He gets angry and doesn't know what he's doing and saying. That's his trouble, Harry. He's not so bad really, if only he wouldn't keep on rowing with Mum. See what I mean?"

"Yes, Kevin. Of course I do. I'm sure you're right. It's because he's sick. And he did hide your glasses in that box of food, didn't he? That shows he was sorry. It's never so bad if people are sorry, is it?"

"Will you ask James not to put my dad in his paper? Not too much, I mean. I've just seen him go into the house with the twins."

"Yes, I will. I promise, Kevin."

Then they were both silent. They watched Mr Ruddy drive away, and it was not long before the twins ran out of the house followed by James who looked up at the camp and then sauntered over to his car and sounded the horn.

"I've got to go now, Harry. James is a good bloke and my mum will be surprised to see me drive up in that smart car... Wish you were coming... Honest I do."

They went down through the wood hand-in-hand with Brock playing round them, and neither of them seemed to care about the others standing round the breakfast table watching them.

James Wilson stowed his bag in the back of the Triumph, shook hands with Mr Sterling and said goodbye to each of the Lone Piners. Then he came over to Harriet and put his hands on her shoulders.

"You're the newest Lone Piner, Harriet, but you're as good as the rest of them. One day, if I'm lucky, I'll have a daughter as nice, as brave and as loyal as you are."

She hugged him for a moment.

"And you won't put Kevin's father in your story - not in a horrid way, will you, James?"

He whispered an assurance and then turned to the boy at his side.

"Into the car with you, Kevin. Front seat with me and fasten your safety belt. We're going back to Ludlow to find your father and mother. My guess is that you haven't seen the last of Witchend."

Harriet looked back at the others and noticed Peter speaking to her father. She saw Mr Sterling nod and smile and then walk across to Kevin and hold

out his hand.

"Good luck, my boy. Don't forget us and come back to Witchend one day... And there's something I'd like you to do for me."

"I reckon I'd do anything, Mr Sterling, and I'll pay for what I took just as soon-----"

"No, no, my boy. You were hungry and nobody was here to help you. It's this little dog. Petronella gave me Brock, but the truth is he's too young and lively for me. Can't cope with him. Will you take him and look after him? He likes you, and when you come back here one day you can bring him along and we'll all be glad to see you both."

"You really mean I can have him for my own?"

Mr Sterling opened the door of the car, helped Kevin in and lifted Brock on to his lap. Then he closed the door and James sounded a farewell on the horn. As the car began to move, Kevin, with a radiant face, turned and waved to Harriet.

She stood quite still until the car had disappeared and then turned to face her friends. Through a mist of tears she could hardly see Peter and Jenny running towards her.